



Statement of Christopher R. Bidwell
Senior Vice President of Security, Airports Council International – North America
Before the Senate Subcommittee on Tourism, Trade, and Export Promotion
“The State of the Travel and Tourism Industry:
Restoring Safe and Healthy Travel to U.S. Destinations”
September 21, 2021

Thank you, Chair Rosen and Ranking Member Scott, for inviting me to participate in today’s hearing. I am Christopher Bidwell, Senior Vice President of Security at Airports Council International – North America (ACI-NA), the trade association representing the local, regional, and state governing bodies that own and operate airports in the United States and Canada. I appreciate this opportunity to speak with you about the current state of the travel and tourism industry, particularly as it relates to instilling public confidence in air travel, enhancing security, and setting a solid foundation for the future of aviation.

As we continue to navigate these unprecedented times, U.S. airports are very grateful for the \$20 billion in COVID-relief support provided by Congress, which has truly been a lifeline for airports across the country. The COVID-relief grants are helping airports offset some of the financial damage from the abrupt, unexpected drop in air travel over the past 18 months, and will help airports prepare for more travelers to take to the skies in the months and years ahead.

Since the beginning of the pandemic, airports have been intensely focused on providing for the health and safety of their passengers, employees, and tenants. Airports have increased cleaning of public areas, checkpoints and restrooms; added more hand sanitizing stations for passengers and employees; installed plexiglass barriers in passenger-facing areas; procured additional cleaning supplies and personal protective equipment; upgraded HVAC systems; and implemented physical distancing measures.

We also continue to coordinate closely with the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA), Transportation Security Administration (TSA), Customs and Border Protection (CBP), Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), and others on recovery efforts, regulatory guidance, and flexibility on regulatory requirements that are crucial in helping airports remain operational while ensuring the safety, security, and health of the traveling public. Of particular importance is our stakeholder coordination role to ensure the consistency of messaging, which is critical to instilling passenger confidence. I want to commend the agency leaders for partnering with ACI-NA and our member airports on these important efforts.

While there was a healthy uptick in passenger volumes at airports this summer, the extended duration of the global pandemic, coupled with the rise of the Delta variant, has caused our numbers

to again dip well below 2019 levels as we experience a downturn in leisure travel, a further delay in the return of business travelers, and the continued closure of our international borders. ACI-NA and our airport members greatly appreciate this subcommittee's interest in restoring safe and healthy travel to destinations throughout the United States. I would like to offer the following federal policy solutions that we feel would greatly assist the travel and tourism industry as we head towards recovery.

First, the most fundamental step the U.S. government could take to assist the travel and tourism industry would be reopening our borders to international travel. Many other countries, including neighboring Canada, have already devised ways to safely open their borders, and it is time for the United States to do the same. Press reports indicate the White House is developing new processes and procedures for international travelers to follow that will eventually replace the current travel restrictions. We hope the White House moves swiftly to put these new protocols in place, and we encourage the federal agencies to coordinate with industry to ensure a quick and smooth implementation of the new measures.

Second, once international travel resumes Congress must ensure there are sufficient numbers of CBP officers, TSA officers, and technology in place to keep security checkpoints and federal inspection stations open, operational, and safe. Long passenger queues create security vulnerabilities associated with large groups of people congregating in public areas. In addition, there is the potential for misconnecting checked baggage and passengers who miss their intended flights.

Particularly for international travel, we recommend directing additional resources towards retaining and hiring additional CBP officers at the ports-of-entry and fully implementing the biometric entry-exit program. CBP user fees have decreased tremendously during this pandemic, which has put a huge hole in the agency's budget, both this year and next. ACI-NA remains at the forefront of a diverse coalition of industry stakeholders who support improving travel and trade facilitation through CBP ports-of-entry. The coalition – which includes leading voices from various shipping, tourism, travel, trade, law enforcement, and employee groups – continues to push for adequate funding to support the existing CBP workforce and to help it grow to meet future travel and trade demands.

Airports also are working with stakeholders in their facilities – including federal agencies, airlines, and tenants – to develop “touchless” aviation security screening processes that provide enhanced security, lower false alarms, and adequate physical distancing for passengers and baggage moving through TSA checkpoints and CBP ports-of-entry. In order to further enhance security and provide for the health of the traveling public, we recommend additional funding for TSA to procure and deploy Credential Authentication Technology with a camera, enhanced Advanced Imaging Technology, and Computed Tomography at security checkpoints. These technologies increase security effectiveness and reduce false alarms and touch points, while maintaining physical distancing.

To achieve these workforce and equipment goals, we recommend finally ending the diversion of user fees designed to enhance security. Each year billions of dollars in both TSA and CBP user fees are needlessly diverted from their intended purpose to subsidize other federal programs. In this time of national emergency, it is critical to stop these budgetary gimmicks, end the fee diversion, and ensure the revenue is restored to its intended use of funding and enhancing crucial aviation security programs.

Third, even while in the midst of the pandemic, Congress should prepare for the future of travel. Several provisions contained in the draft of the Omnibus Travel and Tourism Act would have a direct benefit to airports and the greater travel and tourism industry.

We appreciate that the draft legislation includes the Ensuring Health Safety in the Skies Act, which passed the Senate unanimously last year. ACI-NA strongly supports this provision. A task force of federal agencies – advised by aviation industry partners – would be very helpful in developing meaningful guidelines and recommendations to address the challenging operational and infrastructure issues related to COVID-19 recovery and future pandemic planning.

We also appreciate that the draft contains a TSA pilot program for one-stop security, through which international passengers and their baggage from up to 10 locations would not need to be re-screened by TSA upon arrival in the United States prior to boarding their domestic connecting flight if the last point of departure airport has a commensurate level of security as the United States. Canada has successfully implemented a similar program for its international connections, and ACI-NA has long supported the United States establishing its own program.

Additionally, we appreciate that the draft contains provisions designed to raise the profile of the travel and tourism industry within the U.S. government, particularly by having officials within the Departments of Commerce and Transportation coordinate and advocate for policies that would expand travel and tourism opportunities both domestically and internationally. Restoring Brand USA and exploring ways to increase participation in Trusted Traveler programs would also benefit the travel and tourism industry.

And while there may be some benefit from cross-training TSA canines to detect for COVID-19, as included in the draft legislation, we want to ensure these highly trained dogs are available for their primary function of screening passengers and their baggage for explosives. Taking any dogs off-line for retraining, certification, or additional breaks could reduce the time they are available at screening checkpoints. This raises potential security concerns and may increase passenger wait times. We recommend Congress and the TSA use the findings from a recently launched COVID-19 detection canine pilot at Miami International Airport to inform any similar program initiated by the TSA.

Finally, one thing has not changed during the pandemic: our airports continue to face substantial infrastructure needs. As travelers begin to return to America's airports, inadequate airport infrastructure that fails to meet the growing needs of local businesses and tourists puts in jeopardy the economic recovery of American cities, states, and regions. In addition to creating jobs, new investments in airports can be valuable tools in helping local communities attract air service, which increases competition and leads to lower airfares for passengers. Airports need additional resources to build the terminals, gates, checkpoints, and ramp areas necessary to attract new air carriers and entice existing ones to expand service. The traveling public gets more choices and lower airfares when airports can build the facilities that provide more airline options and more service alternatives.

In March 2021, ACI-NA [released an updated infrastructure needs report](#) detailing the more than \$115 billion in infrastructure needs across the national airport system over the next five years. Since this survey was conducted during the pandemic last summer, it does not fully account for all of the new public health-related infrastructure upgrades airports need to make, such as future HVAC

improvements to provide airports the ability to keep up with developing air quality technology, additional space for physical distancing near gates, and touchless technology to assist passengers through the airport. Coupled with a current debt burden of nearly \$90 billion from past projects, the report clearly shows that our airports are falling further behind in their efforts to upgrade their facilities and improve the overall experience for their passengers.

We greatly appreciate the \$20 billion in airport-infrastructure funding included in the Senate's bipartisan infrastructure bill. This one-time infusion of capital will help jumpstart new projects at airports around the country. Given the \$115 billion in infrastructure needs across the system, though, Congress must find new ways to ensure continuity in funding more of these much-needed improvement projects once the new federal funding has been exhausted.

As leading economic engines in their communities, airports are an integral part of the overall travel and tourism industry. ACI-NA and our member airports will continue to work together with our government and industry partners to weather this current crisis so we can get Americans and international passengers traveling again through an aviation system that is stronger, safer, more secure, and more resilient than ever.

Thank you for this opportunity today. I welcome your questions.