

SCIENCE-BASED STRATEGIES TO RESTORE CONFIDENCE IN AIR TRAVEL

This year's annual US Chamber of Commerce Aviation Summit focused on the recovery of our sector. US and international industry leaders identified critical elements of the path toward a recovery of commercial air travel.

Passenger levels in the US are still down more than 40%, with limited hope that air travel will return to sustainable levels by the fall of 2021 with carriers burning cash in excess of \$150 million a day in the first quarter of 2021. Airports are not expecting to get back to 2019 levels for another five to seven years, which appears to be a slower recovery than anticipated by the carriers according to the International Air Transport Association (IATA).

Issues of concern raised by industry leaders focused on identifying the critical elements for a recovery of the air travel sector included the need to reopen the Canada-US border, digital health passports, the industry's pledge to net carbon emissions by 2050, and the impact of improving e-meeting technology.

All agreed that any recovery effort has to include the restoration of confidence in air travel. To this effect, the report recently released by the world-renowned Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health, was cited as a solid framework for recovery. Entitled Assessment of Risks of SARS-CoV-2 Transmission During Air Travel and Non-Pharmaceutical Interventions to Reduce Risk, the two-phase report focuses on strategies and tactics to reduce risks of disease transmission during air travel. The report was drafted in cooperation with the Center for Public Leadership of the Harvard Kennedy School of Government.

This report is the result of the Aviation Public Health Initiative (APHI). Its findings and recommendations are science-based and conclude that with a comprehensive compliance of a layered approach, which includes education and awareness, screening, physical distancing, process management, personal protection equipment, and ventilation gate-to-gate, reduces the risk of transmission onboard aircraft below that of other routine activities during the pandemic, such as grocery shopping or eating out.

The APHI combined a team of faculty and associates at the Harvard School of Public Health, including environmental, infectious disease, medical, industrial hygiene, epidemiological and social scientists. "The project grew from interest by the aviation industry to both reduce risks of ... disease transmission and safely reinvigorate operations in the midst of the global pandemic." Airlines for America (A4A) and a consortium of aircraft and equipment manufacturers, airline operators, and airport operators sponsored the project. The findings and recommendations, however, are the independent conclusions of its authors and researchers.

The APHI project took a systems approach to problem assessment and solution building, engaging a wide scope of key aviation industry constituents. The objective was "to form a comprehensive understanding of the intersection between the science informing (virus) transmission and the operations in the aviation environment". The intent was to formulate a broad analysis of options available to mitigate and reduce the risk of COVID-19 and its variants within the aviation system.

The report was presented in two phases. The focus of Phase One Gate-to-Gate report was two-fold: 1) To understand the dynamics introduced by the potential presence of the virus in the confined space of a commercial passenger aircraft; and 2) To recommend actions and strategies to reduce and mitigate the risk of transmission on board the aircraft during cruise as well as boarding and deplaning.

The recommended actions and strategies apply to the operators of airlines and rely critically on the behaviors and actions of airline cabin crews, airport employees, cleaning personnel, and individual travelers, who together protect against disease transmission.

The Phase Two report draws two checklists to help travelers, airport employees, and crew. The first, the COVID-19 Checklist for Airport Travelers and Employees, lists ten reminders before and at the airport. The second, Checklist for Aircraft Passengers and Crew, suggests another ten on-the-plane reminders.

The report suggests behavioral strategies to enhance aviation public health safety. Its research supports that the transmission of the virus intensifies or slows, in part, as a function of human behavior. "Curtailing risky behaviors is key to mitigating the pandemic, its anxieties, and its economic implications."

It is key that government and industry adapt a positive approach to restoring traveler confidence in air travel and thus help our industry to recover from this horrendous blow. Taking a page out of the Harvard report would help set such a constructive course.

In Canada, current restrictions on air travel, considered the most severe by IATA, are rapidly weakening our carriers' competitiveness with US and international carriers. Canadian carriers have not benefited from government support enjoyed by carriers in all but one other G8 country.

Canadian carriers, whose resilience is being pushed to extremes through no fault of their own, recall Henry Ford's famous quote "When everything seems to be against you, remember that the airplane takes off against the wind, not with it".

ATAC calls on the Government of Canada to adopt progressive solutions such as those brought forward in this summit as quickly as possible.