

Airlines ask Biden to drop mask mandate and testing requirements for travelers

The CEOs of the nation's largest airlines are asking the Biden administration to drop the federal mask mandate on airplanes, along with the pre-departure testing requirement for international travelers. Although COVID-19 cases in the U.S. have fallen sharply in the last two months and restrictions are being lifted across the country, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention earlier this month extended its mass transit mask mandate by 30 days, until mid-April, and masking guidelines for airlines remain in place.

"Now is the time for the administration to sunset federal transportation travel restrictions - including the international predeparture testing requirement and the federal mask mandate - that are no longer aligned with the realities of the current epidemiological environment," the CEOs of 10 U.S.-based passenger and cargo airlines, including Delta, American and United, wrote in a letter to President Biden.

The letter states that while the airlines and their employees supported the federal mask mandate when it was first implemented, especially because it did away with the possibility for airline-by-airline rules in the early days of the pandemic, they now feel it is no longer necessary.

"The persistent and steady decline of hospitalization and death rates are the most compelling indicators that our country is well protected against severe disease from COVID-19," the letter states. "Given that we have entered a different phase of dealing with this virus, we strongly support your view that 'COVID-19 need no longer control our lives.'"

While initially popular with employees, over the past two years flight attendants and gate agents in particular have taken the brunt of flyer frustration over the masking rules. Despite fewer flyers than pre-pandemic levels, cases of disruptive passengers have soared over the last two years. Airlines last year banned thousands of passengers due to unruly behavior.

"It is critical to recognize that the burden of enforcing both the mask and predeparture testing requirements has fallen on our employees for two years now," the letter read. "This is not a function they are trained to perform and subjects them to daily challenges by frustrated customers. This in turn takes a toll on their own well-being."

Citing the planes' onboard air filtration systems as well as the nation's high level of immunity thanks to vaccines and prior infection and the CDC's most recent guidance indicating that 99% of the U.S. population live in areas of low or medium transmission and therefore no longer needs to wear masks indoors, the carriers argue it is time to wind down masking rules for them as well.

The letter noted that masks could also still be worn voluntarily, even if the mandate is removed. "The effectiveness and availability of high-quality masks for those who wish to wear them gives passengers the ability to further protect themselves if they choose to do so," the letter read.

Delta Air Lines, in its own separate statement, also stressed that passengers would not be barred from wearing face masks. "N95 and KN95 masks that were previously unavailable are now widely available for personal protection as are vaccinations and other medical advancements for those who choose them," the carrier wrote.

The carriers also ask Mr. Biden to lift the pre-departure testing for international travelers. They argue such measures are ineffective, citing The World Health Organization, which determined in January that "the failure of travel restrictions introduced after the detection and reporting of Omicron variant to limit international spread of Omicron demonstrates the ineffectiveness of such measures over time." WHO did note, however, that preventative measures such as masking and testing "should be based on risk assessments."

"The United Kingdom, the European Union and Canada have recognized this reality and lifted travel restrictions," the letter states. "The U.S. inconsistency with these practices creates a competitive disadvantage for U.S. travel and tourism by placing an additional cost and burden on travel to the U.S. Further, many outbound travelers are not willing to risk being stranded overseas."

Following a massive surge fueled by the Omicron variant, COVID-19 cases in the U.S. are at their lowest since last summer. Meanwhile, cases in the U.K. are rising

again as restrictions are lifted and the Omicron subvariant BA.2 spreads. But the case numbers are nowhere near their Omicron peak, and former FDA commissioner and current Pfizer board member Dr. Scott Gottlieb told “Face the Nation” on Sunday that there is evidence the U.K. has already seen the peak of BA.2 infections.

“I think we’re going to continue to see low levels of infection through the summer,” Gottlieb predicted. “But before we get there, we’re probably going to see some tick-up of infection like the Europeans are seeing right now, maybe not as pronounced.”

Source:

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