

April 16, 2020

The Honorable Elaine Chao
Secretary
U.S. Department of Transportation
1200 New Jersey Avenue, SE
Washington, DC 20590

Dear Madam Secretary:

As an international team of medical and scientific experts, as well as the President of the Transport Workers Union of America, we urge you to require masks for all passengers and workers using the airline, public transit, and passenger rail systems in the United States.

The science is clear. People with Covid-19 are most infectious in the early part of the malady. During that time, many of them have no or few symptoms. Infected individuals are using public transit and passenger rail to go to work; they fly on airplanes; and they travel in their community to buy essentials. They spread the virus without even knowing it. As a result, transportation passengers and workers are at very high risk of contracting this dangerous illness.

Our team of scientists and medical experts are willing to brief you on why it is essential to change policies immediately to stop the spread. The medical team is widely respected in their fields of expertise. Jeremy Howard is a distinguished research scientist at the University of San Francisco, founding researcher at fast.ai and a member of the World Economic Forum's Global AI Council. Dr. Anne W. Rimoin is a Professor of Epidemiology at the UCLA Fielding School of Public Health and Infectious Disease Division of the Geffen School of Medicine. She is the Director of the Center for Global and Immigrant Health and is an internationally recognized expert on emerging infections and global health.

The Transport Workers Union of America (TWU) represents over 150,000 workers in the transit, air, rail, university, utility, and services sectors. TWU members have been decimated by this disease. Fifty-eight lives have been sacrificed. Ten thousand TWU members have either received positive Covid-19 diagnoses or are under quarantine. Our members are scared for their lives and we demand decisive action now.

Here are the facts: the virus is largely spread by larger droplets emitted when people talk and breathe. These droplets can be stopped (90%+) at the source by a simple cloth mask. In about 0.1 seconds after these larger droplets are emitted, much of it evaporates, leaving much smaller particles that will float in the air for a longer time. However, the non-medical grade masks that passengers and workers have access to are unlikely to adequately protect them if used sporadically. Medical grade masks are in short supply and priority access is given to hospitals and first responders. Therefore, transportation safety will increase dramatically if passengers and workers all wear masks, even if they are not medical grade.

We urge you to take immediate action to require masks for everyone using passenger transportation systems in the United States. Our medical team is available to brief you on the science and public health implications at any time.

We must work together to save lives. We urge you to act now.

Sincerely,

John Samuelsen
International President
Transport Workers Union of America

Jeremy Howard
Distinguished research scientist at the University of San Francisco, co-founder of fast.ai, member of World Economic Forum Global AI Council

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