

United States Senate

Washington, DC 20510-1304

March 10, 2020

The Honorable Robert R. Redfield, MD
Director
Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
1600 Clifton Road
Atlanta, Georgia 30329

Dear Director Redfield:

I write with concerns over the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) screening procedures at major United States airports in light of COVID-19. As of this week, there are more than 110,000 COVID-19 cases in more than 100 countries. More than 700 people in the United States have tested positive for the virus and at least 26 have died. My home state of Illinois now has 19 cases and the Governor has declared a state of emergency. With Chicago O'Hare Airport being one of the first airports to conduct CDC screening—and being one of the busiest airports in America—I write to obtain clarification and clear guidance from CDC about airport screening procedures in place to protect Americans from the coronavirus pandemic.

On January 17, the CDC announced it would be screening passengers arriving from Wuhan, China, into the John F. Kennedy (JFK), Los Angeles (LAX), and San Francisco International (SFO) Airports. Less than a week later, the CDC expanded this screening to Chicago O'Hare and Hartsfield-Jackson Atlanta Airports. There are currently 11 airports in the U.S. that are currently screening passengers from China and Iran.

In the meantime, the State Department has issued Level 4 Travel Advisories (Do Not Travel) to China, Iran, and South Korea. They have also issued Level 3 Travel Advisories (Reconsider Travel) to Italy, Mongolia, Turkmenistan, and Azerbaijan. The CDC has issued Level 3 Travel Health Notices for China, Iran, South Korea, and Italy. However, travelers from only two of these countries with high level travel advisories—China and Iran—are currently being screened at U.S. airports for symptoms of COVID-19.

With the highest level of travel advisories declared by both the CDC and the State Department, I am concerned that travelers from countries with high incidences of COVID-19 are not being screened, particularly Italy and South Korea. I am also troubled by the discrepancy in travel advisories between the CDC and the State Department, as Americans rely on these notices to make informed decisions about travel.

In Illinois, a Cook County resident in his 20s flew into Chicago O'Hare from Italy, who became the fifth reported case of COVID-19 in Illinois. Thankfully, this individual is recovering at home now and in good condition. Illinois state health officials confirmed that he acquired the infection while in Italy. To my knowledge, this individual was not screened at the airport—despite traveling from a high risk area with State and CDC travel notices—and has consequently been in contact with many others, possibly transmitting the virus to others in Illinois.

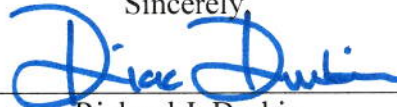
Another student returning from studying in Italy flew into O'Hare this month, and later took Amtrak from Chicago to St. Louis. She then tested positive for COVID-19. Amtrak notified all passengers on her train and comprehensively disinfected the train and both the Chicago and St. Louis stations as a precaution, but she was likely in contact with many people along both her journey and her return to her final destination. These two cases exemplify the need for additional screening at U.S. airports for travelers coming from high risk areas.

I am also concerned about the protections that CDC and other airport workers are being given to stay safe from contracting COVID-19. Reuters reported this weekend that two CDC screeners working at LAX have tested positive for coronavirus and that additional screeners have asked their supervisors this week to change official protocols and require stronger masks.

Given the global spread of the virus—and the increased cases we have seen from Italy and other countries with travel advisories—it is critical to have a comprehensive screening process in place for travelers coming from highly infected areas, and to ensure that our screeners are protected. I urge the CDC to consider expanding traveler screening to other high risk countries, improve workplace protections for screeners, coordinate with the State Department on travel advisories, and provide clear communication to airports and all Americans on travel guidelines and procedures related to COVID-19.

Thank you for your attention to this matter. I look forward to working with you to help keep Americans safe and protected from the threat of this public health challenge.

Sincerely,



Rickard J. Durbin
United States Senator