

The Status of COVID-19 Testing in the U.S. Aviation Industry

Daisuke Takagi, Japan International Transport and Tourism Institute, USA

1. Introduction

Cases of the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) are again increasing in the United States. In order to encourage demand for tourism during the pandemic, many tourism destinations are trying to welcome tourists by requiring proof of a negative COVID-19 test result. However, in reality, it is still difficult to ensure that enough COVID-19 testing is available. It might even be more challenging if results are required within 72 hours prior to arrival, including for travel to Hawaii and some other places. To resolve this problem, many airlines and airports have partnered with the healthcare industry. Tourists can receive a result prior to boarding by taking a test approved by the Food and Drug Administration (FDA), either at home or in person. This report will outline the current status of COVID-19 inspection programs provided by the U.S. aviation industry.

2. Testing by Airlines

2.1 United Airlines ¹⁾

United Airlines was the first airline to announce a testing option for tourists, although only for routes to Hawaii, following the requirement for passengers traveling there to submit a negative coronavirus test result (when tourists traveling to Hawaii receive a negative result within 72 hours prior to departure, they will be exempt from performing 14 days of self-quarantine). Tourists who fly from San Francisco International Airport (SFO) to Hawaii can take a test either at the airport or at a drive-through testing site upon making a reservation on the designated website. The testing that is provided by GoHealth at SFO costs 250 dollars, and takes 15 minutes to get a result. On the other hand, the drive-through testing performed at the United Airlines facility near the airport takes 20 – 30 minutes, and costs 110 dollars. Tourists who take a test to board a direct flight from San Francisco to Hawaii can either receive an email from United Airlines one week before the scheduled flight or call them directly.

2.2 American Airlines ²⁾

American Airlines has a partnership with LetsGetChecked and CareNow, healthcare industry providers of COVID-19 testing, on routes for Hawaii, Costa Rica, and Caribbean countries. An at-home test is done during a video conference call by a LetsGetChecked expert, and costs 129 dollars, including the price of receiving express mail of the test result within about 48 hours. In-person testing for the Hawaii route can be performed within 72 hours before departure in the Dallas/Fort Worth area, where American Airlines is based. The fee is 150 dollars at designated clinics and 249 dollars at the airport. On their website, American Airlines recommends for passengers who'll be make connecting flights to take an at-home test. In instances where a passenger will take a test on the day of departure, they are advised to allow for an additional hour for check-in. According to their website, American Airlines will accept changes to flight schedules or will issue travel credits if passengers receive a positive test result. For flights to Caribbean countries, passengers can take a test at Miami International Airport (MIA).

2.3 Hawaiian Airlines ³⁾

Hawaiian Airlines offers 2 kinds of testing options for passengers. A reservation for drive-through testing at San Francisco International Airport and Los Angeles International Airport (LAX) guarantees a test result within 36 hours, and costs 90 dollars. A premium option at 150 dollars is also available to receive a test result on the day of travel. A saliva-collecting mailing test kit provided by Vault Health is also available for 150 dollars, and guarantees that result notifications will be sent within 24 hours of the kit's arrival at the laboratory.

2.4 JetBlue ⁴⁾

JetBlue, like Hawaiian Airlines, has partnered with VaultHealth, and offer 150 dollars' worth of tests for 143 dollars. In late September 2020, JetBlue announced that they would provide all passengers with an at-home test by mail that discloses results within 72 hours. Passengers can order a test through the Vault Health website for JetBlue by entering their name, email address, and a confirmation code. In JetBlue's

news release, they conveyed that “All travelers should thoroughly research their destination or reentry travel requirements then make the best decision for testing based on their travel itinerary to avoid any disruptions. Properly timing testing to adhere to travel requirements must also be taken into consideration.”

2.5 Alaska Airlines ⁵⁾

Alaska Airlines has partnered with Carbon Health, and offer testing at temporary healthcare institutions on the West Coast, starting in Seattle, for passengers traveling to Hawaii. The tests cost 135 dollars, and results are available within 2 hours. Testing was only available in Seattle in October, but from November, locations offering direct flights to Hawaii expanded one-by-one, starting from Portland, then San Jose, San Diego, Anchorage, and Los Angeles.

3. Testing by Airports ⁶⁾

3.1 Tampa International Airport

Tampa International Airport (TPA) partnered with BayCare Health System to start a testing program at the airport for all departing or arriving passengers without any restriction for destination or airline. In this program both PCR tests and speed antigen tests are provided at the main terminal. Although this service was going to be offered on a trial basis until October 31st, it was decided to continue after November, except for Thanksgiving and Christmas, until the end of 2020. The service is available from 8am to 2pm on a walk-in basis. Passengers can also take a test upon submitting travel confirmation within 3 days after their flight. The cost of PCR testing is 125 dollars, and the cost of speed testing is 57 dollars.

3.2 The Main Airports in the State of Alaska

In order to avoid 14 days of self-quarantine, the state of Alaska asks passengers to provide a negative result from a PCR test which was done within 72 hours prior to arrival. In cases where passengers arrive without having taken a test, they can get tested at the main airports in Alaska, such as at Anchorage (ANC), Fairbanks (FAI), Juneau (JNU), and Ketchikan (KTN). Although residents in Alaska can take a test for free, non-residents need to pay 250 dollars for a test done at the airport. Passengers who take a test upon arrival will be quarantined until they receive results.

3.3 John F. Kennedy International Airport, LaGuardia Airport, and Newark Liberty International Airport

The Port Authority of New York and New Jersey (PANYNJ) established testing sites at John F. Kennedy International Airport (JFK) and LaGuardia Airport (LGA) with NYC Health + Hospitals, a public benefit corporation, beginning with an opening of LGA’s facility at the end of October. The testing site is open from 9am to 7pm daily, and does not require a reservation. PCR tests are administered, and result

can be obtained within 3~5 days without any fee. Furthermore, JFK and Newark Liberty International Airport (EWR) have a partnership with XpresCheck, and offer PCR testing, speed nasal swab tests, and blood antibody tests. These tests provide rapid results, with outcomes available within 15 minutes. In order to take one of these 3 tests, a reservation is required through the XpresCheck website. Every day, 500 people get tested at JFK’s clinic and a maximum of 350 people get tested at EWR’s clinic. The fee is 75 dollars for one test, and 90 dollars for both antibody and PCR tests without insurance. XpresCheck is also going to open testing sites at LGA and Boston Logan International Airport.

3.4 Burlington International Airport

GarnetHealth has newly opened a testing site at Burlington International Airport (BTV) in Vermont. The testing site is open every day from 8am to 8pm. The speed nasal swab test costs 125 dollars, and the PCR test costs 175 dollars, with PCR test results available within 36~48 hours. An online reservation is required prior to testing.

4. Conclusion

Mainly in Europe and the United States, industry groups are asking for tests to be conducted to replace self-quarantine efforts led by governments. For example, in the United States, the Coalition for Safe Alternatives to Quarantines was organized primarily by the airline lobby group Airlines for America (A4A), Airports Council International-North America (ACI-NA), Global Business Travel Association, American Chamber of Commerce, and the U.S. Travel Association. ⁷⁾ They sent a letter to the United States Department of Transportation, United States Department of Homeland Security, and United States Department of Health and Human Services, asking to replace entry/departure restrictions and self-quarantine with testing prior to departure and contact tracing done by coordinating with each state governor and overseas partners.⁷⁾ While there has been an increase in activity for pre-departure testing in order to resume international air travel, the situation is not straightforward, as some expertise say pre-departure testing only proves a negative result at the time of testing and does not prove that passengers don’t get infected right before departure or during flights. I would like to continue to monitor this trend, as resuming international air transportation is an urgent subject for the aviation industry.

References

1) <https://hub.united.com/2020-10-15-united-airlines-starts-customer-covid-19-testing-program-at-san-francisco-international-airport-2648216793.html>

2) <http://news.aa.com/news/news-details/2020/American-Airlines-Takes-First-Steps-to-Open-International-Markets-to-Travel-with-Preflight-COVID-19-Testing-OPS-DIS-09/default.aspx>

3) <https://newsroom.hawaiianairlines.com/releases/hawaiian-airlines-expands-pre-travel-covid-19-testing-options-with-convenient-at-home-service>

4) <http://blueir.investproductions.com/investor-relations/press-releases/2020/09-28-2020-194516403>

5) <https://newsroom.alaskaair.com/2020-09-30-Alaska-Airlines-to-offer-rapid-COVID-19-testing-for-Hawaii-bound-guests>

6) <https://www.afar.com/magazine/these-us-airports-to-have-covid-19-testing>

<https://matadornetwork.com/read/airports-can-get-tested-covid-united-states/>

<https://thepointsguy.com/news/laguardia-covid-testing/>

7) https://www.ustravel.org/sites/default/files/media_root/document/CoalitionforSafeAlternativestoQuarantines.pdf