

Flight Attendants President Encourages Airlines To Continue Addressing Issues

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Sara Nelson says airlines are at a critical crossroads where they could actually take advantage of what has been the most dismal year ever in the industry.

If anything, the COVID-19 pandemic has peeled back a layer of inherent problems in aviation for all to see that Nelson believes should continue to be addressed even if the virus magically went away tomorrow.

“I’m going to suspend disbelief for a minute and just imagine that (COVID-19 is) gone. I would get right back to where we were and talk about what we have exposed in COVID and that is a jobs crisis, a wage crisis, a health care crisis,” she said.

The Association of Flight Attendants president had an interview with Rolling Stone magazine as part of the magazine’s new “The Next Wave” series, on the new leaders who will shape America’s future.

Nelson said this is the time to react.

“We’ve got to use this moment now to really make change for the long run,” she said. “People can no longer be working two and three jobs just to survive. We have to have a life where people can have bread and roses, too. So that’s what I’d get to right away, is fighting forward and using this moment and this shared experience to make life better for all of us.”

As for the physical aspect of flying, Nelson said all the changes incorporated by the airlines were long overdue and are likely here to stay.

“I do not want to see us go backward on our cleaning procedures on airplanes. One thing flight attendants can tell you is that we have never seen our airplanes so clean and we want to keep it that way,” she said. “I think too that, for a while here, we’re going to have to be clear about how we’re boarding. These mask policies are probably going to be here to stay for a little while. We have the ability to think more about the people on the planes rather than just the shareholders. We need to rethink how business is operating.”

Nelson, who oversees 50,000 workers at 20 different airlines, said she believes it was flight attendants who were among the first people in the general public to learn of the coronavirus.

“I heard about the coronavirus outbreak in December of 2019. We fly to every corner of the Earth as flight attendants and so when there is a communicable disease outbreak we often are hearing about it before anyone else because we have to be very aware,” Nelson said. “We have to put in place our procedures on the plane that help to stop the spread even before you know all the characteristics about it. There are things that we can do. So we started working on this and sharing good information with crews who were flying to Asia.”

The virus hit American shores in January of 2020. By late winter/early spring, not only did the U.S – and the world – have a full-blown health crisis on its hands not seen in almost a century, but it was also facing an economic crisis.

“What was really concerning right in that moment in March and April was whether or not the airlines would even be able to meet payroll,” she said. “This was such a dramatic and swift change that at that time, it was about getting the financial support so that we would have the ability to fight the virus. We used that time after we got that financial support to put those safety measures in place. So we immediately started advocating on the mask policies. We were also learning more about the virus at the time.”

