

Airlines try contact tracing in bid to reduce international restrictions



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WASHINGTON — The major U.S. airlines are launching a voluntary contact tracing program for international passengers, pledging to collect data from travelers entering the country and send it to the CDC.

Who and what: The initiative is spearheaded by Airlines for America, the main U.S. industry trade group. It includes commitments from Alaska Airlines, American Airlines, Delta Air Lines, Hawaiian Airlines, JetBlue Airways, Southwest Airlines and United Airlines.

The carriers will ask passengers to share their legal name, two phone numbers, email address and the physical address they'll be staying in the U.S. or permanent residence.

The goal: "We are hopeful that this measure, coupled with existing testing requirements for passengers flying to the U.S., will lead policymakers to lift travel restrictions so that international travel can resume and the social and economic benefits of that travel can be realized," said A4A president Nick Calio in a statement.

Airlines had been hoping that new international testing requirements, finalized in the last days of the Trump administration, would be coupled with rescinding travel restrictions on passengers coming from the U.K., EU and Brazil. But the Biden administration has so far declined to do so.

Contact tracing struggles: Early in the pandemic, the Trump administration and airline industry went back and forth repeatedly on who should be responsible for domestic contact tracing, a conflict that was never fully resolved.

The CDC published a rule last year requiring airlines to collect certain information, but it hasn't been enforced.

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