Unifor Response to Priority strategies to optimize testing and quarantine at Canada's borders

June 11, 2021

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Introduction

Unifor is pleased to see the government finally begin to engage on plans to re-start travel, but a more fulsome plan is required.

Following the May 28th release of Priority strategies to optimize testing and quarantine at Canada's borders by Health Canada's COVID-19 Testing and Screening Expert Advisory Panel (Expert Panel), the government of Canada has carefully floated some ideas to eliminate quarantine time for fully vaccinated, travelling Canadian Citizens and permanent residents. That small change is a minor step in the right direction but more needs to be done to restart the aviation sector.

Unifor urges government to implement the Expert Panel's recommendations to safely restart international travel. As vaccination levels increase and provinces implement re-opening plans, the time to plan for the safe restart of travel has come.

Unifor's Aviation Policy Working Group

In the summer of 2020, after aviation workers had been grounded for months in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic, Unifor struck an Aviation Policy Working Group made up of 12 local union leaders in the aviation sector. The Working Group worked together over the course of the first months of the pandemic to develop Unifor's National Aviation Recovery Plan.

Unifor represents nearly 17,000 members in the aviation sector. The working group consists of members from every sub-sector in which our members work including pilots, air traffic controllers, flight service specialists, customer service representatives, airport staff, aircraft mechanics and flight attendants.

The plan focused on three areas for recommendations including financial support for the industry in the short-term, a plan to safely facilitate passenger flights across international borders and developing and implementing a long-term vision for the industry that includes social, financial and environmental sustainability.

Aviation Working Group Response to Expert Panel's Report

Unifor's Aviation Policy Working Group recommends the priority strategies to optimize testing and quarantine at Canada's borders be used as a road map to facilitate safe travel for travellers and a safe return to work for the thousands of people in the aviation sector who remain laid-off due to COVID-19 related travel restrictions.

Addressing the panel's recommendations
The working group supports the priority strategies laid out by the Expert Panel and specifically highlights the following recommendations:

- Eliminate the requirement that travellers arriving by air quarantine in a government-authorized accommodation;
- Introduce quarantine exit on day 7 of quarantine with a negative PCR test;
- Increase follow-up and monitoring of quarantining travellers to ensure compliance;
- Equalize border measures between the land border and air border in order to eliminate loopholes that drive people to American airports instead of Canadian airports; and
- Eliminate departure testing and quarantine requirements for fully vaccinated travellers.

Unifor began a discussion with the Minister of Health in the summer of 2020 to promote a move to dynamic quarantine and quarantine exit upon negative test. This group is pleased to see the Expert Panel recommend this action.

The working group is also pleased to see the expert panel continue to take COVID-19 very seriously. The recommendations included in this report serve to improve safety by incorporating new scientific understanding of the virus and the technology used prevent and detect it. Furthermore, while the panel recommends removing the mandatory hotel quarantine for air travellers, this is done to improve compliance or the likelihood that travellers will abide by quarantine rules for the full days of requirement. The working group also appreciates the recommendation to increase monitoring of quarantined travellers to ensure compliance.

Addressing additional considerations
The working group recognizes that in the short-term it may be necessary to implement differentiated rules and requirements for groups of people based on vaccination status. This should be considered a short-term strategy.

Various efforts to establish proof-of-vaccination certificates are underway in several jurisdictions and within industries. It is imperative that all levels of government in Canada work together to establish a framework and clear guidelines that support a seamless and consistent application of certificates that best coordinates a beneficial restart to the Canadian economy.

Further, the working group urges government officials to resolve the valid concerns laid out in the March 2021 Chief Science Advisor's report regarding vaccine certifications. Any program to implement proof-of-vaccination certificates must consider equity, the appropriateness of application among vulnerable populations, personal privacy and data protection as well as human rights that may be incompatible with certain forms of vaccine certification. Government must ensure the short-term need for proof-of-vaccination does not result in overreach by government agencies in gaining access to the personal lives of travellers. These are of utmost importance in ensuring proof-of-vaccination certificates are respected and effective.

One more item for consideration is the treatment of children aged 6-11 in the testing and quarantine process. Currently, children under 5 are exempt from testing requirements. People twelve and over are eligible for the vaccine and will be subject to rules based on proof of vaccination. However, there is no guidance that we could find on the testing and quarantine rules for children aged 6-12 who are not exempt from testing and also not eligible for a vaccine. Government must clarify this for families with children.

<u>The time to act is now!</u>
Scientists and health care professionals will continue to build on the current knowledge over time. The working group encourages government to continue to monitor new information and update plans accordingly – but that should not be an excuse to wait.

Given the release of the panel report, the ongoing expansion of vaccinations across Canada and the release of provincial restart plans, the federal government must now push ahead with a safe plan for international travel and a further recovery plan for the aviation industry.

Beyond COVID-19 – a vision for the future

The working group developed Unifor's National Recovery Plan for the Aviation sector in the fall of 2020. Unifor, this working group and our local unions have been advocating for this plan for many months. The plan includes recommendations to safely re-open borders, to give travellers and airlines more certainty around once again increasing capacity.

It also contains a vision for the future that includes decent work; robust health and safety standards and a thriving industry for passengers and workers. Unifor members have been through air transportation crises before. In the past, air transportation industry employees have been required to bare the brunt of the destruction, while executives and shareholders recover quickly. This time around, the pattern must be different, ensuring that thriving employees and satisfied travellers are recognized as important components of successful industry – in the short-term and the long-term.

Conclusion

Unifor's Aviation Policy Working Group, the Aviation Council and the Unifor Pilots Association of Canada have been advocating for the industry throughout the pandemic, putting forward recommendations necessary to ensure people are protected through the pandemic and the industry is ready for take-off as soon as restrictions are lifted.

The Expert Panel's report highlighting priority strategies for testing and quarantine at Canada's borders should be regarded as a roadmap to facilitate safe travel and a return to work for aviation and travel and tourism workers across the country. Government should implement these recommendations without delay; half measures should not be an option.

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