

United States Senate
WASHINGTON, DC 20510

April 23, 2020

The Honorable Elaine Chao
Secretary
United States Department of Transportation
1200 New Jersey Avenue, SE
Washington, DC 20590

Dear Secretary Chao:

The Essential Air Service (EAS) Program connects over 170 small communities in the U.S. to the National Air Transportation System, providing rural communities that simply are not profitable to serve with an essential connection to major airports and metropolitan areas throughout the country. However, with the Centers for Disease Control & Prevention (CDC) continuing to advise the American public to avoid discretionary travel as a result of the coronavirus (COVID-19), traffic through our rural airports has precipitously declined. These disruptions have already caused 53 airlines to suspend or severely reduce flights, and we are concerned that the smaller, less profitable airlines who predominately serve our rural constituents through the EAS program will have the most difficulty remaining solvent during these next few months. While we appreciate the steps you have taken to increase flexibility within EAS, more needs to be done to help EAS and its partner airlines maintain the capacity to serve our constituents when business and travel are allowed to resume.

As you know, communities located less than 210 miles from the nearest large- or medium-hub airport must not exceed subsidy amounts of \$200 per passenger and must maintain an average of 10 enplanements or more per service day, or face termination of eligibility within the EAS program. We applaud the Department of Transportation (the Department) for issuing verbal guidance recently that provided much-needed flexibility within the EAS program to allow EAS carriers the option to reduce scheduled flights by 50% and continue to receive 100% subsidy compensation. We also appreciate the Department's commitment to pay carriers at the completed flight rate if they are unable to complete flights due to factors beyond their control, like the recent closure of the Federal Aviation Administration's (FAA) Indianapolis Air Route Traffic Control Center. Unfortunately, these commonsense reforms excluded communities participating in the Alternate EAS (AEAS) program, which serves seven states around the country. It is critical that we leave no communities behind now or in the future, so we ask that you treat AEAS and EAS communities equally by including AEAS communities in the Department's new guidance, confirming that AEAS communities are eligible for compensation when flights cannot be completed due to factors beyond the carrier's control, and amending any grant agreements as necessary to reflect these clarifications. To ensure that all communities are treated equitably, we also ask that you clarify that the receipt by the Department of a viable traditional EAS bid shall not preclude a community's participation in AEAS. Finally, given the extreme circumstances of the COVID-19 crisis and the steep decline in passenger travel nationwide, we call on you to

exercise your waiver authority and exempt all EAS and AEAS communities from the community eligibility requirements for the duration of this calendar year.

We are also aware that Congress has a role to play in ensuring that our communities weather this crisis. For example, there are additional statutory requirements that may require Congressional action, and we remain concerned that the decline in international flights may reduce overflight fees that provide critical funding for this program. We applaud you again for the steps you have already taken, and we look forward to working with you as Congress considers additional ways to address the economic and social impacts of COVID-19 on our states. We call on your support to help protect these communities as well as the traditional EAS and Alternate EAS programs.

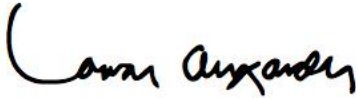
Sincerely,



Joe Manchin III
United States Senator



Shelley Moore Capito
United States Senator



Lamar Alexander
United States Senator