

The effect of COVID-19 on Hartsfield–Jackson Atlanta International Airport, and resumption of operations

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic has introduced a new invisible workplace hazard into our airport environment. In response, our management team applied a systematic approach in developing strategies to minimise risks and impacts to this imminent threat. Extensive efforts were focused on amending our emergency planning and continuity of airport operations to facilitate and support airline and concessionaire's service

levels. This paper discusses how, while developing our facility pandemic response plan and restoration strategies, our management team has integrated various safety-management principles, such as policy, safety assurances, communication and risk-management approaches, to reduce and mitigate employee and passenger risk and exposure. As we look towards a vaccine and recovery, our safety resiliency improved with more proactive actions including continuity of business operations, technology enhancements, online training, teleworking, virtual meetings and stakeholder collaborations and building a robust, resilient, active Safety Management System adaptive to any emergency such as COVID-19.

Keywords

COVID-19, safety, response, communication, emergency

HARTSFIELD–JACKSON AIRPORT FACILITY SUMMARY

Hartsfield–Jackson Atlanta International Airport (ATL) is the world’s busiest passenger airport. It is owned and operated by the City of Atlanta. In 2019, ATL reached a milestone of over 110 million passengers in a calendar year. The 4,700-acre property is comprised of multiple facilities, including Domestic and International terminals, five runways, five City of Atlanta fire stations, seven concourses, fuel farms, multiple hangars and cargo buildings.

Before the COVID-19 pandemic reached Georgia, ATL completed approximately 2,500 flight operations daily. By April 2020, we experienced 95 per cent passenger reduction leading to decreased flight operations of approximately 500 daily.¹ Airlines consolidated their operations to certain concourses, closing a majority of food and beverage

and retail locations throughout the airport (Table 1).

SHELTER-IN-PLACE

In response to the pandemic, an executive order imposing a shelter-in-place requirement for nonessential services was issued by the State of Georgia. Subsequently, the City of Atlanta closed most city facilities to slow the spread and minimise the impact of COVID-19. As such, a mandatory telework deployment of all nonessential employees took effect. The airport, however, remained open with mission-critical staff for operations.

The following services were identified as mission-critical in support of our airport pandemic response plan:

- Public safety (airport police, fire, security and enforcement)

Table 1 ATL COVID-19 Impact by the Numbers

Pre-COVID Activity	COVID-19 Impact period	Change
April 2019	April 2020	
Total Aircraft Operations: 75,669	Total Aircraft Operations: 20,406	Total Aircraft Operations: –73.03%
Total Passengers: 9,233,034	Total Passengers: 453,362	Total Passengers: –95.09%

Table 2 Timeline

Feb 28	Mar 10	Mar 11	Mar 12	Mar 18
The Department of Aviation (DOA) submits a Coronavirus Response Plan to the Mayor's Office of Emergency Preparedness (MOEP).	Delta Air Lines announces capacity reductions due to COVID-19 travel demand reduction. DOA HR is directed to draft letter addressing protective measures for COVID-19.	The DOA submits its telework plan. WHO declares a global pandemic for COVID-19. The White House announces a travel ban for non-US citizens from 26 European countries.	First fatality of COVID-19 reported in Georgia.	The DOA implements the City of Atlanta's mandatory telework policy. All nonessential and essential employees are asked to stay home and only mission-critical staff are to report to work until further notice.
Apr 8	Apr 10	Apr 26	May 1	May 8
Governor Brian Kemp extends shelter in place order through April 30 and State of Emergency through May 13.	Portions of Concourse E closed due to a reduction in operations.	Concourse B closed due to a reduction in operations.	The Georgia Public Health State of Emergency is extended through June 29.	6-foot social distancing markings have been placed at all security screening checkpoints.
May 11	May 23	Jun 4	Jun 30	
ATL staff begin distributing masks to customers at domestic and international security checkpoints.	Department of Aviation receives 300,000 masks from FEMA for distribution to Airport employees.	Delta requests to resume operations on Concourse B to accommodate increased flight schedules starting on June 25.	The Georgia Public Health State of Emergency is extended through August 11.	

Note: ATL, Hartsfield-Jackson Atlanta International Airport; COVID-19, coronavirus disease-2019; FEMA (Federal Emergency Management Agency)

- Aviation operations (emergency management, airside/landside and ground transportation)

As city governments and business operations grapple with COVID-19, several employers and employees are dealing with a new reality – telecommuting. Working from home may be completely new for some, while others may have some experience occasionally working remotely, such as during inclement weather. No matter the history, working from home may be the new norm for many employees.

Realising the potential impact of some employees working from home means less in-person interaction, which can lead to isolation and elevated stress levels. To help mitigate possible mental

strain employees may experience during this pandemic, our management team has executed several strategies to effectively communicate and engage employees, such as ensuring availability and access to Psychological Services and Employee Assistance Program.

To further engage and enhance employee's situational awareness, Airport General Manager, John Selden, with help from the Office of Public Affairs team, implemented a virtual employee forum to communicate with employees. This live town hall format created an interactive process that allowed staff to comment and present questions for information sharing and increased connectivity during the shelter-in-place and teleworking order (Table 2).

RESUMPTION OF OPERATIONS

The top priority for the leadership team at Hartsfield–Jackson Atlanta International Airport is to provide a safe operating environment. The effects of the COVID-19 pandemic have resulted in a temporary reduction of services, systems and operations at the airport.

Our resumption of normal operations and recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic included a phased approach based on operational demand, with a focus on ensuring a safe environment in all the airport's facilities.

COVID-19 Pandemic Plan, we designed the processes and guidance to meet or exceed recommendations from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), National Safety Council, May 2020.² The pandemic recovery will be long term, so it will be critical that all employees continuously follow safety and infection-control policies at all times.

Because of the time required to reach the end-state of recovery (return to prepandemic passenger traffic), our processes and plans will be updated regularly.

This plan addresses planning, response, mitigation and recovery for a COVID-19 pandemic at ATL. The plan includes, but is not limited to: a business continuity response plan for coronavirus, essential functions of the Department of Aviation (DOA) and measures to maintain those functions, alternate staffing plans, communications to employees, evolving threats of the virus, triggers to activate certain response levels, and any challenges to continuance of airport operations. The subsequently given overview summarises our plans for resumption of operations. March 2020, Development

of our COVID-19 resumption of service plan for return of normal operations and recovery included a phased approach based on operational demand, with a focus on ensuring a safe environment in all the airport's facilities.³

Employee Safety

- All employees who interact with the public daily, or those who work in public spaces, are required to wear a face mask.
- Employees are required to practice social distancing in public areas, office areas, break rooms, and while attending in-person meetings.
- Employees who do not consistently interact with the public are required to wear a mask only while in public areas of the airport.
- Employees will receive a care kit inclusive of three face masks, disinfectant wipes and hand sanitiser.
- Train employees on the proper use and care of PPE.

Before each work period, employees will undergo a temperature scan. Employees whose temperatures are above 100.4f will be sent home and directed to contact their medical providers (Figure 1).

Employees will be provided CDC guidance for evaluating self-illnesses and reporting methods in the workspace:

- Employees share in the responsibility for keeping the workspace clean and sanitised.
- Employees will have access to cleaning supplies that should be used throughout the day to maintain clean personal workspaces.



Figure 1 Employee temperature checks

Customer Touchpoints

Sanitisation Support

More than 300 hand sanitiser dispensers have been placed throughout the public areas of ATL. Locations include:

- Ticket counters/lobby areas
- Baggage carousels
- Atrium area
- Transportation mall
- Moving sidewalks
- Escalators/elevators
- Boarding gates

Social Distancing Measures

Temporary signage and floor markings are placed throughout the airport to

provide guidance on social distancing and to maintain six feet of space. Areas include, but are not limited to:

- Checkpoint queuing areas
- Ground transportation pick-up locations (transportation network companies, hotels, shared-rides)
- ATL Plane Train
- ATL SkyTrain
- Boarding gates

Plexiglas partitions installed in areas including, but not limited to:

- Domestic security checkpoints
- Ticket counters
- Food and beverage counter areas



Figure 2 Dept. of Aviation face masks

Face Covering in Public Areas

- Customer service representatives distribute face coverings at the entrance of the main security checkpoint to passengers who are not wearing masks (Figure 2).
- All airlines now require passengers to wear masks.

Operational Efficiencies

- Removal of temporary walls
- Baseline utilities (air conditioning)
- Adjust/remove temporary secured areas
- Examine potential locations and processes for passenger temperature checks, if mandated by federal government

Facility Cleaning

- Contract cleaning companies have increased the frequency of cleaning all public areas in the central passenger terminal facility
- Cleaning schedules for DOA facilities are being evaluated and will be adjusted as needed to ensure work areas are sanitised
- Transportation system operators have reduced capacity in vehicles to promote social distancing and have increased the cleaning frequency
- Indoor air-quality improvements

Operational Efficiencies Technological Integrations

- Limit use and exchange of cash/printed currency
- Encourage use of touchless and mobile payment technology (ie Apple Pay, Google Pay, WeChat Pay etc)
- Encourage contactless ordering options

Parking Facilities

- Highly encourage the credit card in/credit card out technology to limit engagement with cashier lanes
- Promote use (via signage and in-person mention) of wearable/digital technology for payment
- Encourage use of kiosk for rental car reservations/vehicle pickup

COMMUNICATION STRATEGY

The DOA has maintained a commitment to share frequent, accurate information with its employees throughout the current pandemic. As we prepare to resume operations, it is important to over-communicate. That communication is pertinent, not only for employees, but also for the media, airport partners, and stakeholders in order to restore confidence and trust and protect the future of our industry.

Our communications plan is based on recommendations and guidelines from the City of Atlanta Office of the Mayor, public health officials and federal partners. It aligns with the department's 'We are Open' campaign and our recovery programme branded #ATLStrong. #ATLStrong encompasses mitigation activity throughout the airport to help combat the spread of COVID-19.

Table 3 Stakeholder segments

Stakeholder segments		
<i>Internal</i>	<i>External (public)</i>	<i>Intergovernmental</i>
Employees	Passengers	Local Officials
Tenants / Stakeholders	News Media	State Officials
Contractors	Business Leaders	Federal Officials
	Community Leaders	
Communication channels		
<i>Digital</i>	<i>Out of home</i>	<i>Social media</i>
Website (ATL.com)	Radio	Instagram
Intranet (ATL Propel)	Television	Facebook
Virtual Meetings/Webinars		Twitter
Blogs		LinkedIn
E-mail		Google

As we get ready for the return of more passengers and employees, an effective communications strategy will help ensure that we are prepared. In the strategy outlined subsequently, we will deploy a range of communications tools and platforms to advise of new protocols and expectations for passengers and employees. Our focus highlights three major areas: employees, the public and intergovernmental (Table 3).

The DOA has used a variety of communication media to include COVID-19 Continuity of Operations Plan Daily Operational Summary, the Emergency Operations Center (EOC) Situation Report, and ATL Status Reports issued daily. These reports require multiple coordination points, with internal and external stakeholders being maintained daily.

The EOC Situation Report COVID-19 is very detailed to provide updates on highlights of federal, state initiative responses, statistics on COVID-19, flight operations, passenger traffic, shutdowns and resources. It is the primary source

for airport stakeholders on COVID-19 and the state of the airport.

The intranet, ATL Propel, is the go-to source for news and information at the DOA. It provides updates on COVID-19, human resources, policies, procedures and safety bulletins.

Situational Report

The Airport General Manager implemented a series of videos (situational report) to provide employee updates regarding the status of airport operations. It is considered a primary source for DOA employees to access updates using their computer or mobile device.

The Aviation General Manager is a visionary leader in ensuring communication as a vital core of the business by keeping DOA employees informed. Here are some examples given subsequently:

Virtual Meetings

As social distancing guidelines took effect around the world, online

meetings have replaced face-to-face interactions and drastically reduced the need for business travel. ‘How the Rise of Virtual Events Due to Coronavirus Could Change the Way We Meet’, an article written, June 2020 by Alex Palmer of North Star Meetings Group,⁴ states that

the COVID-19 crisis has forced countless events to be cancelled or postponed, and it will probably be months before the full impact on the meetings industry and the global economy can be assessed. But members of the industry are also seeking and finding creative opportunities to keep business going . . . While there are many aspects of in-person events that can’t be replicated in digital form, the virtual gathering also presents distinct opportunities that could prove beneficial for organizations over the long run.

Airport Meetings

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, the majority of airport meetings were face-to-face meetings with attendees averaging about 20–35 participants in a conference room. In addition, conference call capability was available for attendees who were not present.

The DOA policy and business practice transitioned to conduct virtual meetings indefinitely to meet CDC guidelines. The technology used by the department included GoToMeeting, Zoom and GoToWebinar to facilitate virtual meetings, which have provided the same value and resources to ensure the continuity of business operations remains intact. In addition, the virtual meeting platform has increased efficiency, time management and broader participation from stakeholders. ATL excelled in resiliency to ensure

stakeholder engagement and maintain its working relationship with all ATL stakeholders.

Online Trainings

Airport Employee Training

The DOA transitioned from mandatory on-site training to an online web-based solution with American Airport Executives solution in October 2019.⁵ AAAE’s (American Association of Airport Executives) Interactive Employee Training and Learning Suite (IET-LS) provided engaging, high-quality training content for airport employees. The courses are hosted using the web-based Learning Suite for tracking and reporting training results or content may be produced for an organisation’s existing LMS (Learning Management System). The IET-LS saved employees time and increased efficiency. IET-LS enabled consistent training to any size population — large or small — and deliver training from anywhere, to anywhere over the web. These online trainings have allowed keeping the airport workforce informed, providing awareness and ensuring social distancing measures are maintained.

DOA Employee Training

In an effort to keep our employees further updated and informed, we have been able to partnership with a vendor and provided online training and certification opportunities. Our Safety Management Team suggested online safety courses to help drive performance, reduce risk and ensure compliance. This effort brings the teams with teleworking staff. Among course offerings are blood pathogens awareness, hazard communication,

general occupational safety, office safety, health-awareness courses and other pertinent safety training. We provide an on-boarding programme that raises awareness of our grounds and our safety expectations. DOA Safety Manager, May 2020, indicated employee participation in these virtual training sessions has resulted in a steady decline in injuries and accidents on our airport campus.⁶

Branding Campaign: #ATLSTRONG

To prepare for the eventual return of passengers to Hartsfield-Jackson, the DOA has adopted a comprehensive airport recovery effort branded #ATLStrong.

#ATLStrong encompasses mitigation activity across the airport to help combat the spread of COVID-19, including best practices for social distancing as well as mask usage, routine cleaning, sanitising, and disinfecting surface areas throughout the Central Passenger Terminal Complex and the other regions of the airport.

FUTURE OUTLOOK

The COVID-19 pandemic has changed business processes to ensure employee safety, and health remains the No. 1 priority. Emergency planning is critical because it prepares in the response, tactical operations and resumption of operations. The continuity of business operations must be at the forefront in dealing with any future pandemic. The resiliency of business operations provides the ability to be mobile, telework and back up operations.

CONCLUSION

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into our airport environment. In response, our management team applied a systematic approach in developing strategies to minimise risks and impacts to this imminent threat. Extensive efforts were focused on amending our emergency planning and continuity of airport operations to facilitate and support airline and concessionaire service levels.

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