

American Airlines will book flights to full capacity

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American Airlines will start booking flights to full capacity next week, ending any effort to promote social distancing on its planes while the United States sets records for new reported cases of the coronavirus.

American's move matches the policy of United Airlines but contrasts sharply with rivals that limit bookings to create space between passengers to minimize the risk of contagion.

The pilots' union at American said it hopes that the airline reconsiders and instead decides to add more flights using idle planes and crews.

American said Friday that it will continue to notify customers if their flight is likely to be full, and let them change flights at no extra cost. The airline said it will also let passengers change seats on the plane if there is room and if they stay in the same cabin.

Since April, American has limited bookings to about 85% of a plane's capacity by leaving about half the middle seats open. However, the airline will start selling every seat it can beginning next Wednesday.

Delta says it is capping seats at about 60% of capacity and Southwest at about 67%, both through Sept. 30. JetBlue says it will leave middle seats empty through July 31 unless the person is traveling with a passenger in an adjoining seat.

United, Spirit Airlines and now American, however, are taking a different approach, arguing that other steps—including stepped-up cleaning procedures and requiring all passengers to wear face coverings—eliminate the need to block some seats. United CEO Scott Kirby has said social distancing is impossible on planes anyway; that even with empty middle seats, people are less than six feet away from each other.

Photos and videos of full flights on American and United have drawn criticism for their lack of social distancing.

The number of confirmed new COVID-19 infections in the U.S. hit an

all-time high of 40,000 on Friday, eclipsing a record set on April 24, according to Johns Hopkins University. Several of American's busiest airports are in states with skyrocketing infection rates, including Texas, Florida, Arizona and North Carolina.

American's headquarters are in Fort Worth, Texas, where Gov. Greg Abbott on Friday rolled back some steps the state had taken just two months ago in an aggressive attempt to re-open its economy.

The airline announced the change forced to retreat last month amid accusations that it was trying to profit from people's fear of contracting a deadly virus.

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