



International Civil Aviation Organization

South American Regional Office

**Third Virtual Meeting of Civil Aviation General Directors of the South American Region on the Response to COVID-19**

(Lima, Peru, 22 September 2020)

RV3/DGAC - WP/09

19/09/2020

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**Agenda Item 3:           Feedback on the progress and challenges in the implementation of CART recommendations and exchange of experiences**

**STUDY OF THE CURRENT STATUS OF MENTAL HEALTH OF THE AERONAUTICAL POPULATION AS AN EMERGING HAZARD IN THE CONTEXT OF COVID-19**

(Presented by Venezuela)

**SUMMARY**

This working paper proposes to explore the current state of mental health of the aviation population in the context of COVID-19, through an anonymous survey-type instrument (VSM-POA 2020), with the aim of obtaining reliable data to identify emerging threats related to mental health and to guide safety risk management.

**1.                   INTRODUCTION**

1.1               Compulsory confinement, social distancing, work from home, school from home, temporary or permanent unemployment, problems in the health and/or economic condition of countries, among others, are factors that play a transcendental role in the mental health of people in the face of this pandemic, which has required adaptation to these changes, especially in life habits, all this in the context of fears about the potential for contracting the SARS-CoV-2 virus, under the permanent uncertainty of whether one will be a symptomatic or asymptomatic carrier, as well as concerns about becoming an infectious agent and thereby putting loved ones at risk, especially the elderly or those in vulnerable conditions due to pre-existing chronic diseases, which undoubtedly gives this pandemic a condition that generates high levels of stress<sup>1</sup>.

1.2               The field of aviation is no stranger to this situation. Industry groups such as the European Pilot Peer Support Initiative (EPPSI)<sup>2</sup> noted that aviation personnel were not prepared for a pandemic, as the psychological stress to which they have been subjected adversely affects their ability to safely exercise their licensing privileges. Reference is also made to the need for restructuring the operators, crews who are losing jobs, and operational/medical licences, among others.

1.3               It can also be said that this concern is shared by the various aviation authorities in the South American Region, which, through the Regional Safety Oversight System (SRVSOP) of the International Civil Aviation Organization South American Regional Office (ICAO-SAM), are making vital efforts to understand and address the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic on the aviation industry.

<sup>1</sup> *Valoración de La Salud Mental del Personal Aeronáutico Venezolano*. Asociación Venezolana de Psicología Aeronáutica (2020).

<sup>2</sup> COVID-19 crisis and its effect on aviation mental health (2020) <http://eppsi.eu/news/eppsi-guide-on-peer-support/>

1.4 As part of the identification of these concerns, scientific associations in the field of clinical psychology, psychiatrists and medical experts in the aviation world joined efforts with the SRVSOP Licensing and Aviation Medicine Panel in the development of advisory circular CA-PEL-67-003 "**Mental Health in Aeronautical Personnel during the COVID-19 Pandemic**", to provide physicians and aviation psychologists with a mental health risk assessment tool, pursuant to Recommendation 3 of the ICAO Council Aviation Recovery Task Force (CART).

## 2. ANALYSIS OF THE CURRENT STATE OF MENTAL HEALTH

2.1 It must be an essential task of States, not only to try to minimise the spread of the virus through biosafety measures, but also to ensure the optimum psycho-physical attitude of aviation personnel, making an additional effort beyond regulatory medical assessments, especially when dealing with a population eager to start operations and hence to maintain their qualifications, and there may be a risk of concealing information or qualifying it in their favour during the individual clinical study. Therefore, promoting the conduction of generalised exploratory studies on the aeronautical population through anonymous surveys becomes a fundamental tool in the attempt to mitigate the risks associated with the danger of loss of mental health.

2.2 Venezuela has promoted the conduction of a survey prepared by the Venezuelan Association of Aeronautical Psychology (AVEPSA), called Instrument for Assessing the Mental Health of Aeronautical Operational Personnel (VSM- POA- 2020). This instrument is a survey that is distributed remotely and that can be accessed from any intelligent electronic device. It is anonymous, which is of great added value to obtain information with the least possible bias, without fear of actions affecting their return to work, such as the possibility of suspension of the aeronautical medical certificate.

2.3 Based on the results obtained in all 1,279 surveys among Venezuelan aeronautical personnel, we have been able to identify answers related to symptoms indicating mental disorders that could be temporarily precipitated by the stressors present in the COVID-19 pandemic, associated with major depression, acute stress disorder and generalised anxiety disorder.

2.4 The levels of satisfaction and well-being of aeronautical personnel in relation to biological (physical), psychological and social aspects are also determined. This information has been of great value in guiding our actions in the area of health, with a view to the resumption and recovery of the aeronautical activity.

2.5 Based on the analysis of the results obtained, the aeronautical authority of Venezuela, together with the industry, will assess and manage emerging hazards and risks within the framework of its State Safety Programme (SSP), applying preventive measures together with the industry and disseminating practices that help the aeronautical population to deal with the identified symptoms.

## 3. SUGGESTED ACTION

3.1 The Virtual Meeting of Civil Aviation General Directors of SAM States is invited to:

- a) Consider the information contained in this working paper; and
- b) Consider carrying out studies to explore the state of mental health of the aeronautical population in the face of COVID-19, through anonymous surveys such as the one suggested in this paper, to guide the actions to be adopted by both the aeronautical medicine departments in relation to aeronautical medical certificates, and the operators in relation to human factors.