



A bold voice for transportation workers

FAA MUST REPORT AIR TRAFFIC CONTROLLER STAFFING ACCURATELY IN CONTROLLER WORKFORCE PLAN

Air traffic controllers keep our skies safe as they efficiently move thousands of aircraft every day throughout the National Airspace System (NAS). Their professional standards are rigorous: new hires undergo extensive training for at least 18 to 36 months depending on their facility assignment. Controllers worked throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, and without their ongoing efforts, air travel could not have rebounded as quickly as we have seen in recent months.

Unfortunately, over the last decade, the total number of certified professional controllers (CPCs) and the total controller workforce (including those in training to be air traffic controllers) have not kept up with attrition. There are 1,000 fewer CPCs today than 10 years ago, and over 10 percent of the CPC workforce is eligible to retire. This has led to staffing shortages at certain facilities and some controllers working six days per week.

NATCA and the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) continue to collaborate to improve controller training and staffing, but without increasing the total number of CPCs, the FAA will struggle to maintain pre-pandemic capacity, let alone modernize and expand the system for new users such as Uncrewed Aircraft Systems (UAS), Advanced Air Mobility (AAM), and the rapid growth of commercial space launches and reentries.

The FAA can start to address these ongoing staffing challenges by updating its annual Controller Workforce Plan (CWP) to reflect operational needs more accurately. The CWP is a statutorily-required annual report provided to Congress by the FAA that is focused on current controller staffing levels and projections over the next ten years. Congress and the FAA also utilize the CWP when making budgetary decisions. The FAA's stated goal is to "staff to traffic" by forecasting traffic volume, hiring, attrition, and other key factors to ensure there is an appropriate number of controllers in each of the FAA's more than 300 facilities.

The fundamental flaw of the CWP is its reliance on overall facility "headcounts" that include developmental controllers (new hires and trainees) along with fully certified CPCs. In addition, the CWP ignores existing CPC operational staffing targets that were jointly developed by FAA's Air Traffic Organization (ATO) and the National Air Traffic Controllers Association (NATCA). These operational staffing targets are based on the positions each facility is required to staff to meet its traffic volume, complexity, and other facility requirements. By neglecting these CPC operational staffing targets when it develops the CWP, the FAA fails to provide Congress and other stakeholders with a complete and accurate picture of controller staffing data.

CWP's flawed "headcount" staffing ranges often give the appearance that a facility is appropriately staffed "within its range," when, in fact, the facility is *below* the staffing range when you exclude trainees (who have never been certified at any facility and who may not successfully complete training at their current facility). These shortfalls are typically even more

pronounced when you compare the overall number of CPCs at a facility to the jointly developed CPC operational staffing target for that facility (i.e., the number of CPCs necessary to actually “staff to traffic”).

The CWP fails to portray an accurate picture of the FAA’s operational staffing needs and current staffing levels, and it creates downward pressure on FAA staffing. As the number of CPCs has declined, FAA’s finance-driven headcount numbers in the CWP inaccurately suggest that FAA can fulfill its mission without the prior full complement of CPCs. This in turn results in fewer new hires, ultimately resulting in even fewer CPCs when FAA fails to keep up with normal attrition. This pattern is repeated annually, slowly ratcheting down the number of CPCs in the system.

In contrast, the operational CPC staffing targets jointly developed by ATO and NATCA are intended to meet current and forecasted operational workload for each facility. These targets (and expected attrition) should be included in the CWP for each facility and can serve as a model for the joint development of an improved CWP staffing standard. These adjustments would correct the shortcomings in the current CWP and, most importantly, put air traffic control operations on a more sustainable path moving forward for the flying public and all airspace users.

We call on FAA to implement these necessary changes to the CWP, and for Congress to ensure the agency has the resources it needs to appropriately staff our nation’s air traffic control facilities.

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