Congress & Administration Must Speed ATC Hiring & Fund Modernization Efforts to Improve Aviation Safety

Boost air traffic controller hiring to address the FAA's controller staffing crisis

One of the most critical issues facing the National Airspace System (NAS) today is the universally acknowledged air traffic controller staffing crisis. The Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) is approximately 3,600 fully certified air traffic controllers short of its operational staffing targets that were collaboratively developed by the FAA's Air Traffic Organization (ATO) and the National Air Traffic Controllers Association (NATCA), with assistance from the MITRE Corporation.

To address this issue, the Transportation Trades Department, AFL-CIO (TTD) strongly supports efforts to implement the five-year maximum hiring requirement for air traffic controllers that Congress passed on a bipartisan basis as part of the FAA Reauthorization Act of 2024. TTD also supports the Administration's plan to "supercharge" air traffic controller hiring at the FAA, including by streamlining the often-lengthy hiring process to hire the "best and the brightest" for this challenging job.

Even with the streamlining efforts, the hiring and training process remains rigorous, including: an application on the USA Jobs website to a periodic vacancy announcement, extensive aptitude testing, and medical and background checks, before progressing to initial qualification training at the FAA Academy in Oklahoma City for several months. Then, if a controller trainee is successful in completing their training at the Academy, it can take two-to-four years of on-the-job training in an ATC facility before they become a Certified Professional Controller (CPC).

Recent high-profile challenges at Newark Liberty Airport (EWR), resulting from technology outages and a controller staffing shortage at the Philadelphia TRACON, which controls the airspace in and out of Newark, have highlighted the need for a consistent and sustainable commitment to air traffic controller hiring and training. Maximum controller hiring is critical because a properly staffed controller workforce is necessary for the FAA to successfully develop, test, deploy, and train the workforce on new technology and modernization programs on time and under budget. Controller staffing and infrastructure progress are inextricably linked because only a properly staffed controller workforce has the flexibility to dedicate sufficient NATCA subject matter experts to work on modernization and infrastructure projects. Without proper controller staffing, investments in infrastructure and modernization programs will not yield their full potential.

As a result, even a "supercharged" hiring process, coupled with the maximum hiring of new controllers over the next five years, will not be sufficient alone to resolve the staffing shortage.

The FAA must commit to a long-term, holistic approach to hiring and training that yields tangible improvements. TTD also supports S.1985, Safe Operations of Shared Airspace Act of 2025, which would, among other things, add an additional five years of maximum hiring. TTD supports ensuring that the NAS is staffed with the best and brightest air traffic controllers for decades to come, and looks forward to working with Congress and the Administration to make this goal a reality.

Boost Hiring for Airway Transportation System Specialists

Congress and the Administration must allocate $150 million from the recently approved $12.5 billion to fund the modernization of Air Traffic Control (ATC), specifically to recruit, hire, and retain 900 Airway Transportation System Specialists (ATSS) at the FAA.

ATSS professionals—commonly referred to as technicians—are the backbone of the FAA's efforts to maintain and modernize the NAS. These dedicated public servants are part of the 11,000 FAA employees represented by the Professional Aviation Safety Specialists (PASS). Their work ensures the safety, efficiency, and reliability of the technology and infrastructure that air traffic controllers, pilots, and the flying public rely on every day.

To achieve the goals of Congress and the Administration for air traffic modernization, it is essential to have a fully staffed and highly skilled ATSS workforce. As the FAA faces significant staffing shortages and increasing system demands, this investment is crucial.

Airport, Operator, and Surface Safety Enhancements Must be Implemented

TTD supports mandatory equipage of commercial aircraft with safety-enhancing alerting systems. This will require expanding the use of ADS-B systems to include ADS-B In, which allows pilots to see nearby aircraft on their displays, and ensures better aircraft separation to improve situational awareness. We thank Senate Commerce Committee Ranking Member Maria Cantwell for introducing S.1985, Safe Operation of Airspace Act of 2025, that would require mainline and regional air carriers to install this technology without regulatory delays. Modernization efforts should expedite the development of advanced aircraft-based surface collision avoidance capabilities with a plan for future mandatory equipage on commercial aircraft. The Surface Situational Awareness with Indications and Alerts, or SURF-A, is a technology under development that directly alerts pilots to potential runway conflicts by leveraging GPS data, ADS-B, and advanced analytics to detect and alert pilots to other aircraft on or near the runway that could pose a safety hazard.

Similarly, Approach Runway Verification (ARV) capability should be installed at airports with airline operations and an operating air traffic control tower. The ARV is a function utilized within

Standard Terminal Automation Replacement System (STARS), the FAA's terminal automation system, which helps air traffic controllers monitor the final approach path of landing aircraft. As of January 30, 2025, ARV is operational at 77 airport air traffic control towers. The FAA is working toward providing ARV to additional airports, with more than 50 planned by the end of September 2025. TTD also supports the expanded deployment of Runway Status Lights (RWSL), or their modernized variant, to more runways. RWSL is an FAA system consisting of lights embedded in the pavement of runways and taxiways designed to automatically signal to pilots and vehicle operators when it is unsafe to enter or cross a runway or begin takeoff. These lights, which are operational at some airports across the United States, turn red in response to traffic and provide direct and immediate alerts without the need for input from controllers.

Airspace resilience will require a modernized, stable and fully functional Notice to Airmen (NOTAM) system to provide timely, accurate, and comprehensive information that pilots need for safe operation of every flight. In addition to the upgrades to the NOTAM system itself, TTD recommends a quality assurance policy for NOTAM modernization, a clear expiration date to review and update missions, and geographic and real time information to provide pilots with increased understanding of the NOTAM information being provided. These improvements will ensure NOTAMs provide critical NAS updates and meet modern flight objectives for pilots and the system. Similarly, the fidelity of the system will require FAA ATC systems and all aircraft operated by airlines be hardened and secured to prevent GPS jamming and spoofing. There have been GPS jamming events at major airports, revealing the vulnerability of aircraft equipped with GPS navigational systems operating in the NAS. The FAA and other federal agencies must identify and implement both operational and technical mitigations to ensure NAS resiliency during a GPS disruption.

Finally, the introduction of new types of aircraft, combined with the increased frequency of commercial spacecraft in the airspace will require additional tools for air traffic controllers. For example, the introduction of "quiet" supersonic aircraft will need to be integrated into the en route airspace. If the anticipated growth of drones and Electric vertical take-off and landing (eVTOL) operations develops, additional tools for surface operations at the busiest airports will be required. ATC services for drones and eVTOL in low altitude airspace underneath the floor of Class B and Class C airspace must not be automated. Separation standards that specifically address the unique operating characteristics of new aircraft entrants, airspace usage evolution, and commercial space operations must be developed. To fully modernize the NAS and maximize airspace safety and efficiency, additional separation standards must be developed for Unmanned Aircraft Systems (UAS), commercial space rockets, and other vehicle types that allow controllers to provide separation services between aircraft and other vehicles within the NAS and avoid loss of separation events.

Provide comprehensive funding to prioritize the modernization, replacement, and repair of

air traffic control technology and facilities

One of the most critical issues facing the NAS today is the need for increased funding for modernization and infrastructure projects within the FAA. As mentioned, the challenges at Newark Liberty Airport (EWR) have highlighted the urgent need for funding to reverse years of deferred sustainment and modernization upgrades at airports and radar rooms across the country. Modernization of the FAA's outdated copper wire telecommunications network to a modern fiber optic network must be an immediate priority at all ATC facilities.

The FAA Reauthorization Act of 2024 included provisions to authorize additional funding, require the FAA to prioritize modernization, report to Congress about unmet technology needs, and place a five-year timeline to accomplish some of these objectives.TTD is proactively engaged in improving the safety and efficiency of the NAS and believes that with increased funding from Congress, these goals can be achieved much sooner. As such, TTD supports the bipartisan efforts of Congress and the Administration to fund and modernize the ATC system.

More funding will be needed, and the FAA must commit to a long-term, holistic approach to modernizing the ATC system. That approach must include the front-line controllers in the development, testing, deployment, and training of their peers on new equipment and procedures. Front-line controller involvement is critical to ensure programs are delivered on-time and under budget, without the need for costly revisions.

TTD supports bipartisan, bicameral efforts to advance these goals and looks forward to working with Congress and the Administration to make them a reality.

Policy Statement No. F25-03
ADOPTED 7.26.25