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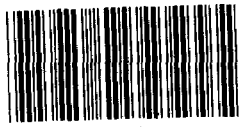

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STATEMENT OF

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RESOURCES, COMMUNITY, AND

ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT DIVISION

BEFORE THE

SUBCOMMITTEE ON HUMAN RESOURCES

OF THE

HOUSE COMMITTEE ON POST OFFICE AND

CIVIL SERVICE

ON FAA AIR TRAFFIC CONTROLLER STAFFING ISSUES

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee:

We appreciate this opportunity to comment on the Federal Aviation Administration's (FAA's) progress in rebuilding the air traffic controller work force and the status of our response to your request for assistance in evaluating H.R. 4003, which would permit FAA to rehire some of the controllers fired as a result of the August 1981 strike.

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Last year at this time, we were in the midst of a major study of the air traffic control work force. Our study was based, in part, on a survey of about 5,500 controllers, their immediate supervisors, and managers of the 74 major air traffic control facilities in the continental United States. Another feature of our study was the collection and analysis of about 4-1/2 years of FAA data on the size and composition of the controller work force, work load, overtime, training, and other issues affecting the controllers' working environment and their morale.

In our report and related testimony in March,[1] we concluded that the growth in air traffic activity was adversely affecting the understaffed controller work force at many major facilities. Controllers told us they were overworked and that the situation could eventually impair their ability to maintain the proper margin of safety. Our consultant, the Flight Safety Foundation, compared the conditions we found to the results of a study they did in 1981 and concluded that conditions within the controller workforce have changed since their study and the present air traffic control system does not provide the same level of safety as before the strike.

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[1] Aviation Safety: Serious Problems Concerning the Air Traffic Control Work Force (GAO/RCED-86-121, March 6, 1986).

Given the inability of FAA to quickly increase the number of qualified controllers or provide new equipment and other measures to immediately reduce controller work load, we recommended that FAA restrict air traffic until it meets its goals for full performance level (FPL) controller staffing and controller overtime. We made several other recommendations concerning actions FAA should take to reduce work load pressures on controllers and to improve the quality of its reporting to the Congress on its controller staffing progress and the overtime being worked by controllers.

In his March 17 testimony, the FAA Administrator said, in essence, that while some problems existed, none was of a magnitude to warrant restricting air traffic. Moreover, he said FAA was well on its way to resolving its problems, and all of its indicators of progress, system performance, and safety were positive. He said FAA had enough controllers to meet the current demand for air traffic services and its flow control program was managed in such a way as to prevent controllers from having to control more traffic than they could safely handle. He acknowledged on the other hand that FAA's goals for improvements in human relations and changes to management styles to enhance relationships were ones that would likely take many years to achieve.

Since issuing our report, we have given FAA individual facility-level summaries of the questionnaire responses from controllers at 69 of the 74 facilities we surveyed. Summaries of the other five were withheld in order to protect the respondents' confidentiality. We sent the same information, along with copies of our report, to the managers and staff of the facilities. We have also arranged to transfer other information back to FAA for its analysis.

We have not yet received the Department of Transportation's response to our report so we are not able at this time to comment on the Department's official response to our report and recommendations.

Our work has shown that a fair amount of confusion exists concerning just what FAA's controller work force is comprised of and what FAA's plans are. Therefore, I'd like to take a few minutes to try to clarify these issues before moving on to our observations on FAA's progress in rebuilding the controller work force to the level FAA believes is needed.

COMPOSITION OF THE CONTROLLER WORK FORCE

As FAA defines them, there are three basic categories of employees comprising the controller work force, full performance

level controllers or FPLs, developmental controllers, and air traffic assistants. FPL controllers are fully certified to operate all positions in a defined area. Developmental controllers include all persons undergoing training at the FAA academy; all being trained at the field facilities, including some who are certified to operate control positions; and other trainees or "pre-developmentals" - persons in special programs such as upward mobility. Air traffic assistants or ATAs are employed soley for clerical duties at field facilities. These duties were previously performed by controllers when not working at control positions such as a radar scopes. The vast majority of ATAs are employed at the air route traffic control centers (hereafter referred to as centers) and at the more complex terminal facilities.

Thus when FAA states that the size of its controller work force is a certain number, and its end-of-fiscal-year-1986 goal is to have a work force of 14,480, the figures exclude first-line supervisors who spend part of their time controlling traffic but include air traffic assistants who do not control traffic and are not trained to.

FAA's PLANS TO INCREASE THE CONTROLLER WORK FORCE

In September 1985, when FAA had a controller work force of about 14,000, the Secretary of Transportation announced that the work force would be increased by about 1,000--about 500 each in fiscal years 1986 and 1987. FAA believes that a controller work force of about 15,000 will be sufficient to meet forecast traffic activity until 1990.

Both news accounts and FAA correspondence as recently as May 29 have said that FAA expects to hire 1,000 new "controllers". In order to clarify how many actual controllers would be added to the work force, we asked FAA to tell us what its controller hiring plan was before and after the Secretary's September announcement. In a written response on April 18, 1986, FAA said that for fiscal year 1986 its hiring plan after the announcement was about the same as the fiscal year 1985 rate of 162 a month. Moreover, FAA said the exact strategy for accomplishing its fiscal year 1987 goal was not yet refined, although it expected to achieve the goal. FAA said it would have to wait until it moved through the fiscal year 1987 appropriation process to have a better understanding of what its resources would be.

PROGRESS TOWARDS ACHIEVING STAFF GOALS

How has FAA progressed in achieving its staffing goals? At the end of March 1986, the work force totalled 14,028, compared with FAAs goal for fiscal year 1986 of 14,480. This represented a net gain of 30 over the first 6 months of this fiscal year so that FAA needed to add 452 more between April 1 and October 1 of this year in order to achieve its goal.

While the overall net gain has been small, the number of FPL controllers has increased by 455. Staffing shortages, however, have been and continue to be more severe at the centers, which control flights between airports. The centers need radar-qualified controllers, and the training failure rate for developmental controllers at the centers has historically been about 35 percent--slightly more than twice the rate for the terminals. Overall, the net gain in the number of FPLs at the centers has been small, and many of the centers are well below their authorized FPL staffing standards.

FAA's data show for example, that for the 20 centers in the continental United States, the number of FPLs increased between September 1985 and March 1986 from 3,032 to 3,148--or by about 1 FPL per center per month. FAA's current staffing standard calls for 5,252 FPLs at the 20 centers. FAA would have to gain 2,104

more FPLs to reach the standard; at the present rate of gain, this will take about 9 years.

This is the case even though controllers have been able to be promoted without having to meet normal time-in-grade requirements and typically rise from a GS-7 to a GS-13 or 14 FPL in about 2 years. Before the strike, it took about 4 to 5 years to achieve these levels but FAA was allowed to waive the time requirements because of the controller shortage following the strike. Although FAA says that the certification requirements for FPL status are the same as before, the on-the-job experience a controller is exposed to before becoming an FPL is clearly shorter. Thus, without the benefit of the time-in-grade requirement waiver, FAA's gains in new FPLs would be about half of what they have been able to achieve.

FACTORS AFFECTING STAFFING PROGRESS

Aside from having sufficient budgetary authority to hire new employees FAA's ability to reach and sustain its staffing goals depends on two factors--the rate of loss of experienced controllers through retirement and the training attrition rate of developmental controllers, which includes failures and withdrawals. Beyond doing all that it can to favorably influence these attrition rates, FAA can increase the controller

staffing level by transferring qualified controllers from overhead positions such as supervision and training staff back to the controller ranks and imposing other restrictions on the movement of controllers. For example, FAA recently announced the award of contracts to outside parties to provide some training at selected centers. Other contracts are to be awarded for automation services. As a result, FAA expects about 200 controllers to return to air traffic control duties.

Retirements may be more numerous than FAA anticipates

Although FAA obviously cannot be absolutely certain about how many controllers will retire, its data on retirement eligibility show that the potential loss could be greater than it may be prepared for. For example, FAA's estimate as of June 9 was that about 490 persons with an air traffic control job classification at terminals and centers would retire this fiscal year. Through this March, 261 controllers had retired. As of April 30, however, another 695 FPL controllers had reached eligiblity, with another 36 due to reach it by September 30. Of the total 731, 305 are employed at the centers where they are more difficult to replace. Added to this potential loss of badly needed experienced personnel is the prospect of losing a large share of first-line supervisors at the centers. As of April 30, 345 of the center supervisors--almost half--were also

eligible to retire; their replacements would have to come from the relatively thin ranks of FPL controllers.

To illustrate how actual retirements can fluctuate from FAA's estimates, FAA estimated in February that 90 persons would retire during this March, April, and May. However, actual retirements totaled 147 for the 3 months--63 percent more than FAA was planning for.

Training attrition will probably exceed FAA's estimates

While our work on training failures and withdrawals--the second major source of controller attrition--is still in process, we have some observations on the validity of two FAA statements about its training attrition rate for this fiscal year.

In the first instance, FAA provided the supporting data for a statement for the record of congressional testimony by the Department of Transportation last February. The training attrition data from FAA were associated with an explanation of how FAA would achieve the controller work force staffing goal of 14,480 by the end of this fiscal year. The data show that FAA assumed an overall training failure rate of 31 percent for the 8 months between February and October 1986, but FAA could not

satisfactorily explain its basis for this assumption. The attrition rate at the academy has averaged about 40 percent, and FAA training officials told us that it is likely to remain at that level for the near future. Added to that is a field training attrition rate (for those who graduate from the academy) which at the centers has averaged 35 percent and at the terminals, 15 percent. Thus the overall attrition rate for trainees hired for the centers is about 60 percent, almost double FAA's assumed failure rate. We are still trying to obtain FAA's explanation for this discrepancy.

The second instance was an April 18, 1986, FAA response to our inquiry about its hiring plans and how its staffing goals would be reached. The response contained the statement that a new program at the academy would result in a greater success ratio in the field portion of the training. The net result of this program would be fewer failures in the field and that FAA would meet the fiscal year 1986 goal of 14,480, according to its latest projections.

Again, we can find no reasonable basis for this statement as it applies to fiscal year 1986. The new program, called the "Common Screen Program," was started with academy classes beginning this fiscal year. According to FAA officials at the Civil Aeromedical Institute and FAA training officials at FAA headquarters who designed the program, it will take 2 to 3 years

before they will know whether the program will reduce the field attrition rate. They said the program would operate best when half the trainees successfully completing the academy are assigned to the centers and the other half to the terminals. In that way, FAA would have the best opportunity to have a better match between trainees' abilities and aptitudes and the level of complexity of the facility to which they are assigned. This, in turn, should ultimately reduce the field attrition rate. However, because of the staffing shortages at the centers, virtually all trainees are being sent to these facilities. As a result the field attrition rate for the centers probably will not decline for some time to come.

STATUS OF OUR WORK ON REHIRING FIRED CONTROLLERS

An alternative not included in FAA's plans to increase its controller work force is to rehire some of the controllers fired because of the 1981 strike. The FAA Administrator is strongly opposed to rehiring any former controllers in any capacity. Among his reasons are that the current work force is against the idea and that it would damage their morale. Also, it would take about 1 year to retrain and recertify any of the fired controllers. He has also recently stated that because of the age of the fired controllers and the time they have been away from the job, air traffic safety would be jeopardized if they

were to return to controlling aircraft. At your request, we are evaluating these and other issues relating to H.R. 4003 and plan to provide you with the results in September.

We have developed and pretested three questionnaires--one for current controllers, supervisors and staff at air traffic control facilities; another for facility managers; and a third for fired controllers. We expect to mail out these questionnaires before July 1.

The questionnaires for the current work force and facility managers deal primarily with their opinions on whether some of the fired controllers should be rehired, the reasons for their opinions, possible conditions that might be set for rehiring, and the potential effects of rehiring on morale and other aspects of the working environment. The questionnaire for the fired controllers asks about their interest in returning to work with FAA as controllers and under what conditions, and about their employment and income since the strike.

FAA does not maintain comprehensive information on the time needed to recertify controllers who have not controlled traffic for extended periods. To compensate for the absence of this information, we have included two types of questions in our surveys: first, the actual time it took to recertify controllers who were initially fired after the strike and later

reinstated as the result of appeals of their cases; and second, best estimates of the average time it would take for fired FPL controllers to recertify at their former facilities.

The suggestions and comments of current controllers, supervisors, and facility managers were incorporated into the design of their questionnaires. In addition, FAA's associate administrators for air traffic and human resources also provided comments on two draft versions of the questionnaires which we have taken into consideration. We also obtained suggestions and comments from six fired controllers on the design of their questionnaire.

We will send questionnaires to about 2,600 randomly selected developmentals, FPL controllers, first-line supervisors and other staff as well as the facility managers at the 74 major air traffic control facilities included in our prior survey. To determine whether there are any differences in the views of personnel of large and small facilities regarding the issue of rehiring some fired controllers, we are also sending questionnaires to a random sample of about 420 controllers, supervisors, and staff at all other FAA air traffic control facilities. Finally, we have selected a sample of 800 fired controllers to complete our survey.

SUMMARY

Let me conclude, Mr. Chairman, by recapping the central points of my testimony. First, the controller work force as defined by FAA includes many people who either do not now or may never control traffic, but excludes others who do. Second, FAA's ability to achieve its controller work force goal of 14,480 this fiscal year is doubtful, and any shortfall in this fiscal year will make it more difficult to achieve its fiscal year 1987 goal of almost 15,000. Third, FAA has not been able to satisfactorily explain its assumptions relating to controller training attrition. Fourth, retirements may be more numerous than FAA anticipates.

This concludes my testimony, Mr. Chairman. I will be happy to answer any questions you or other Subcommittee members may have at this time.