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Report to the Chairman, Subcommittee on Investigations and Oversight, Committee on Public Works and Transportation, House of Representatives

October 1987

FAA STAFFING

FAA's Definition of Its Controller Work Force Should Be Revised



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United States
General Accounting Office
Washington, D.C. 20548

Resources, Community, and
Economic Development Division

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October 23, 1987

The Honorable James L. Oberstar
Chairman, Subcommittee on
Investigations and Oversight
Committee on Public Works and
Transportation
House of Representatives

Dear Mr. Chairman:

In August 14, 1986, testimony before your Subcommittee, we identified problems with the way the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) defines its air traffic controller work force and reports this work force's staffing progress to the Congress. These problems stem primarily from including persons who do not control air traffic in the controller work force and excluding others who do. At the August 1986 hearing, we concluded and the Subcommittee concurred that changes are needed to the way FAA defines the controller work force and reports on its staffing progress.

Our work for you also shows that using the current controller work force definition for budgetary purposes is creating staffing difficulties for FAA that could adversely affect air traffic control efficiency. We are, therefore, officially transmitting to you our findings and recommendations for revising the definition of the controller work force and measuring controller staffing progress. The Department of Transportation has advised us that it believes these changes will result in accurate and more useful reporting.

FAA's Definition of the Controller Work Force Should Be Revised

FAA defines the controller work force as a subset of the category called air traffic service personnel. The air traffic service personnel category includes full performance level (FPL) and developmental controllers as well as first-line supervisors, facility managers, flight service station specialists, traffic management coordinators, training specialists, personnel management specialists, air traffic assistants (ATAS), and secretaries.

The controller work force subset of air traffic service personnel, as defined by FAA, is comprised of the FPL and developmental controllers and the ATAS. As such, this definition includes some air traffic service personnel who do not control air traffic and excludes others who do. As

discussed below, ATAs and some developmental controllers will never control air traffic but are counted in FAA's definition. On the other hand, first-line supervisors and traffic management coordinators do control air traffic at least part of the time, but they are not counted in FAA's controller work force definition.

ATAs and Trainees Should Not Be Counted in the Controller Work Force

FPL controllers are fully certified to operate all positions within a defined area. Developmental controllers include not only all persons being trained at FAA field facilities, but also all persons undergoing initial screening and training at the FAA academy and other persons in special programs, such as upward mobility. While most developmental controllers at field facilities spend a portion of their time controlling air traffic, persons in the latter two categories not only do not perform traffic control duties, but about 40 percent of them do not complete the initial training. ATAs are employed solely for clerical duties at field facilities. They do not separate or control air traffic. The vast majority of ATAs are employed at FAA's enroute centers, which control air traffic between airports, and at the busier terminal facilities.

At the August 1986 hearing, FAA said that it includes ATAs and persons undergoing initial training at the academy in the controller work force to allow comparisons of the work force before and after the 1981 strike and subsequent firing of 11,400 controllers. Before the strike, persons undergoing initial training were included in the work force count and, although there were no ATAs, the clerical duties now being performed by ATAs were performed by controllers when they were not working at control positions, such as radar scopes. FAA's justification for including trainees and ATAs, however, seems inconsistent with its position that comparisons of pre- and post-strike controller staffing levels are inappropriate because the air traffic control system is managed much differently today than it was before the strike.

First-Line Supervisors and Traffic Management Coordinators Should Be Counted in the Controller Work Force

While including staff who do not control air traffic in the definition of the controller work force, FAA excludes other staff who do, at least part of the time. First-line supervisors and traffic management coordinators at FAA field facilities are selected from the ranks of the FPL controllers. First-line supervisors are responsible for monitoring individual sectors of airspace and adjusting traffic flows. Traffic management coordinators are responsible for monitoring traffic flow and ensuring that safe levels of air traffic are not exceeded.

FAA policy requires first-line supervisors and traffic management coordinators to rotate through all positions on which they are certified each month and to spend at least 10 percent of their time actually controlling traffic. According to FAA, this is so they retain currency and a full appreciation of the controller's work environment.

Because both first-line supervisors and traffic management coordinators monitor and adjust traffic flows, FAA has testified that they are important to enhancing air traffic safety and reducing delays. They are not counted, however, as part of FAA's controller work force.

The net effect of FAA's controller work force definition is illustrated in appendix I. The controller work force at the end of fiscal year 1986 was about 14,800 under the current definition, but would have been 14,400 if limited to only those who actually separate and control air traffic.

Using the Current Controller Work Force Definition for Budgetary Purposes Is Creating Staffing Difficulties

According to FAA, the term "controller work force" was never intended to be used as a measure of staffing adequacy. FAA has stated, however, that since the Congress has specified minimum levels for this work force, the current definition of the controller work force is presenting operational problems. First-line supervisors and traffic management coordinators, like controllers, facility managers, flight service station specialists, secretaries, and others are counted toward FAA's air traffic service personnel ceiling. But, since first-line supervisors and traffic management coordinators are not included in the controller work force subset, increases in the controller work force within the existing air traffic service personnel ceiling require corresponding decreases in other categories of employees. According to FAA, excluding first-line supervisors and traffic management coordinators from the controller work force has resulted in unstaffed traffic management coordinator positions, supervisors performing traffic management functions on a time-permitting basis over and above their normal duties and responsibilities, and controllers filling first-line supervisory positions at key field facilities on a temporary basis.

We found FAA's fiscal year 1987 authorized traffic management coordinator staffing to be below the levels called for by FAA's staffing goals in all 16 enroute centers we checked (FAA has 20 enroute centers in the continental United States) and full-time traffic management coordinator staffing as of February 28, 1987, was below the FAA-authorized levels in 11. We also found full-time traffic management coordinator staffing to be below FAA-authorized levels in 8 of the 11 terminal facilities having

authorized traffic management coordinator levels in fiscal year 1987. For example, the Chicago enroute center was staffed with only 4 full-time coordinators, instead of the 20 called for by FAA's staffing goals.¹

For fiscal year 1988, the Department of Transportation has requested an additional 955 air traffic service personnel, including 185 traffic management coordinators and 200 first-line supervisors and technical support personnel. According to the Department, they are needed to help improve the flow of air traffic and reduce delays. We agree, and believe that counting first-line supervisors and traffic management coordinators as part of the controller work force will provide FAA with increased flexibility to handle air traffic as safely and efficiently as possible by permitting FAA to move controllers to where they are most needed while still complying with congressionally specified minimum controller work force levels.

FAA Should Establish Staffing Targets for Full Performance Level Controllers

Our work for you also has shown that the term FAA used as the key indicator of staffing progress before the 1981 strike—FPL controller—should be reported and used in addition to the one FAA has used since the strike—operational controller. The term “operational controller” represents the sum of the number of FPL controllers, who are certified to operate all positions in a defined area, and those developmental controllers who are certified on at least two nonradar or radar positions. Thus, the term operational controller combines controllers who have significantly different responsibilities, levels of experience, and training.

Developmental controllers are limited in their work assignments, and increasing the number of FPL controllers can increase both productivity and a facility manager's staffing flexibility. Reporting on the number of FPLs as well as developmental controllers, therefore, would provide the Congress with an improved picture of FAA's staffing progress.

FAA agreed with this view at the August 1986 hearing, and its fiscal year 1988 budget justification shows the number of FPL controllers for fiscal years 1981 through 1986 as a subset of operational controllers. (See app. II.) But, FAA's fiscal year 1988 budget justification does not include staffing targets for the number of FPL controllers needed in fiscal years 1987 and 1988. FAA, however, subsequently provided a fiscal year 1988 FPL controller staffing target for the record at an April 21, 1987, fiscal

¹See FAA Staffing, Air Traffic Controllers' Work Load and Operational Performance (GAO RCED-87-138FS, May 6, 1987).

year 1988 appropriation's hearing by the Subcommittee on Transportation and Related Agencies, House Committee on Appropriations. The FPL controller staffing target was 10,258 or about 85 percent of the 12,155 operational controllers targeted for fiscal year 1988.

We believe that including FPL staffing targets in the fiscal year budget justifications along with the information FAA is already reporting will provide the Congress a more precise and meaningful way of measuring FAA's staffing progress and assessing its staffing needs.

Conclusions and Recommendations to the Secretary of Transportation

FAA's definition of the controller work force would be more accurate if it were changed to include only those who are responsible for separating and controlling air traffic. This would require adding first-line supervisors and traffic management coordinators who spend part of their time controlling traffic. Persons who do not control air traffic, including ATAS, those undergoing initial screening and training at the FAA academy, and those in special programs such as upward mobility, would no longer be counted as part of the controller work force. Furthermore, while reporting the number of FPL controllers is a step in the right direction, FAA should establish annual staffing targets for this important controller work force subset.

Therefore, we recommend that the Secretary of Transportation require the FAA Administrator to

- Revise the definition of the controller work force to include only those who are responsible for separating and controlling air traffic, including first-line supervisors and traffic management coordinators. The revised definition should be used in reporting the controller work force count to the Congress.
- Include in FAA's fiscal year budget justifications and other reports to the Congress staffing targets for FPL controllers.

Views of Agency Officials

We discussed the findings and recommendations in this report with officials of the Office of the Secretary of Transportation. They said that both the Department and FAA will implement these recommendations and believe their implementation will enhance the usefulness of FAA reports on controller staffing. They pointed out the importance of explaining why the changes are being made and the nature of the changes so as to avoid confusion among those accustomed to the current reporting practices.

To perform our review, we collected and analyzed information from two principal sources: (1) staffing data from FAA's payroll, personnel, and other systems and (2) an extensive 1985 questionnaire survey of controllers, first-line supervisors, and the managers of the 74 busiest FAA facilities in the continental United States. Our March 1986 report,² which included the results of our 1985 survey, made several recommendations to FAA to improve the clarity of its reports to the Congress on meeting its controller staffing goals. Our August 1986 testimony outlined our findings on this issue and expanded upon our recommendations on the basis of additional work we had done at FAA headquarters and field facilities. Since that time, we have monitored FAA's controller staffing progress and have been keeping the Congress informed of who comprises the controller work force.³

We are sending copies of this report to the Chairmen of the Subcommittees on Transportation and Related Agencies, Senate and House Committees on Appropriations; the Chairman of the Subcommittee on Aviation, House Committee on Public Works and Transportation; and the Chairman of the Subcommittee on Aviation, Senate Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation. We will also send copies of the report to the Secretary of Transportation; Administrator, FAA; and Director, Office of Management and Budget; and will make copies available to other interested parties upon request.

This report was prepared under the direction of Kenneth M. Mead, Associate Director. Major contributors to this report are listed in appendix III.

Sincerely yours,



J. Dexter Peach
Assistant Comptroller General

²Aviation Safety: Serious Problems Concerning the Air Traffic Control Work Force (GAO: RCED-86-121, Mar 6, 1986)

³FAA Air Traffic Controller Staffing and Related Issues (GAO: T-RCED-87-42, July 29, 1987)

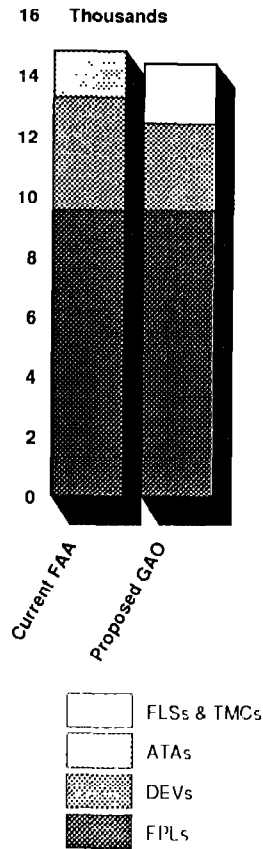
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Abbreviations

ATA	air traffic assistant
FAA	Federal Aviation Administration
FPL	full performance level (controller)
GAO	General Accounting Office

The Controller Work Force Under FAA and GAO Definitions



Source: FAA centralized personnel management information system

Table I.1: The Controller Work Force as of 9/30/86:

	FAA	GAO
Full Performance Level Controllers (FPLs)	9,528	9,528
Developmental Controllers (DEVs)	3,761	2,901
Air Traffic Assistants (ATAs)	1,514	0
First Line Supervisors (FLSs)	0	1,751
Traffic Management Coordinators (TMCs)	0	220
Total	14,803	14,400

Source: FAA's centralized personnel management information system

FAA's Fiscal Year 1988 Air Traffic Service Employment Summary

Air Traffic Total Program	FY 1981	FY 1982	FY 1983	FY 1984	FY 1985	FY 1986	Estimated FY 1987	Estimated FY 1988
Centers and Towers								
FPL Controllers	4,904	5,612	6,724	7,580	8,315	9,528	(c)	(c)
Developmentals (GS-11/12/13)	1,830 ^a	5,815 ^a	5,256 ^a	2,712	2,071	1,714	(c)	(c)
Operational Controllers	(b)	(b)	(b)	10,292	10,386	11,242	11,944	12,155
Developmental Pipeline (GS-5/7/9)	(b)	(b)	(b)	1,921	2,146	2,047	1,503	1,523
Total Controllers	(b)	(b)	(b)	12,213	12,532	13,289	13,447	13,678
Air Traffic Assistants	0	1,190	1,273	1,501	1,466	1,514	1,553	1,547
Total Controller Work Force	(b)	(b)	(b)	13,714	13,998	14,803	15,000	15,225
Area Supervisors/Managers/Chiefs	3,056	2,907	2,867	2,894	2,910	2,640	(c)	(c)
Training/Automation Spec / and Other Support Personnel	2,551	1,414	1,886	1,843	1,984	1,479	4,087	4,138
Total Center/Tower Employment (9/30)	12,341	16,938	18,006	18,451	18,892	18,932	19,087	19,363
Flight Service Stations	4,610	4,421	4,438	4,421	4,423	4,354	4,190	4,014
Planning, Direction and Evaluation	783	917	969	961	964	891	923	923
Total Air Traffic Employment (9/30)	17,734	22,276	23,413	23,833	24,279	24,167	24,200	24,300
FTP Positions	29,405	29,211	26,050	25,818	25,004	25,130	25,222	25,097

^aFor fiscal years 1981 through 1983 developmentals include both developmentals and developmental pipeline. Breakout is not available.

^bController work force was not reported prior to fiscal year 1984.

^cBreakout not available.

Source: FAA's Fiscal Year 1988 Budget Justification.

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