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FAA Air Traffic Controller Staffing and Related Issues

Statement of
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Before the
Subcommittee on Investigations of the
House Committee on Post Office and Civil Service



133587

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee,

We appreciate this opportunity to comment on the Federal Aviation Administration's (FAA's) efforts to rebuild the air traffic controller work force. Our testimony focuses primarily on FAA's progress in hiring and training new air traffic controllers and factors influencing the pace of that progress. We will also highlight several issues that we believe are of increasing importance in deciding on the size of the controller work force.

Overall, our work shows that while FAA has made significant progress towards recovering from the 1981 air traffic controllers' strike, FAA has fewer air traffic controllers today to handle considerably more traffic within the same air traffic control system than it did before the strike. While the Department of Transportation (DOT) recently announced new controller staffing targets, it has not identified for the Congress what level of service the proposed staffing levels can be expected to provide or what impact they will have on the traveling public and the aviation industry. Until this is done, it will be difficult to determine the most appropriate size and composition of the controller work force.

We recognize that there is no easy solution to the problem of increasing the air traffic controller work force. Moreover, factors affecting how quickly FAA can increase this critical work

force, such as training, meeting new work load requirements, and attrition, are not confined to controllers. We found that FAA faces these same issues in managing its maintenance work force.

FAA'S EFFORTS TO INCREASE THE
CONTROLLER WORK FORCE

The Congress mandated that at all en route centers and the busiest airport terminals, 60 percent of those eligible to be full performance level controllers (FPLs) should reach that level by September 30, 1987. The number of FPLs is a key measure of staffing progress because of their skill level. FPLs represent controllers who have reached full proficiency and can be used on any position within a given area. Currently, all but six of the nation's 23 en route centers and three small terminals have reached the congressional goal.

Immediately before the strike, FAA had 13,205 FPLs. After the strike, only 3,429 FPLs remained with FAA. And as of June 30, 1987, FAA had 9,617 FPLs. (See attached table 1.) Table 2 shows staffing for major facilities as of July 4, 1987.

The Congress also directed that FAA reach a total air traffic controller work force level of 15,000 by the end of this fiscal year. The controller work force includes FPLs, controllers in training--called developmentals--and air traffic assistants who

perform clerical support functions for controllers. FAA has met this congressional goal as well, having reached a level of 15,105 as of June 30, 1987.

WHAT IS AN ADEQUATE CONTROLLER WORK FORCE?

Since airline deregulation began in 1978, there has been a significant increase in airline ridership from 275 million passengers in 1978 to 419 million in 1986. About 600 million passengers are expected by the 1990's. Also, according to the Air Transport Association, the number of commercial air carrier departures rose from 5 million to 6.4 million between 1978 and 1986. At the same time, the traveling public has experienced an increase in flight delays. These developments, among others, have focused attention on the critical objective of maintaining safety while simultaneously reducing delays and satisfying demands for increased air traffic growth. There has been considerable discussion about the need to build an adequate controller work force to help address these sometimes competing objectives.

While FAA is making progress in increasing its controller staff, questions remain about the appropriate size and composition of this work force and whether there are limits to the increases in air traffic demand that this work force can reasonably be expected to manage. The Secretary of Transportation has amended the fiscal year 1988 appropriation request to include an increase of 580

controller positions, to bring the controller work force to a level of 15,805 by September 30, 1988. The Secretary has requested these additional resources so that ". . . an adequate work force is in place by fiscal year 1989." However, the level of service this work force will be able to provide was not defined, so the specific implications of these staffing levels for airline scheduling, routing, and delays are not known.

We believe it is important for the Department to address for the Congress the linkages between controller staffing and the level of service it will provide. In this way there will be a common understanding of what the Department's view of an adequately staffed work force will mean for the aviation industry and the traveling public. This would help explain, for example, whether the traveling public should expect these staffing levels to yield significant reductions in ground or enroute delays, in addition to maintaining air safety. Similarly, the airline industry would be in a better position to assess what, if any, accommodations or constraints on scheduling flights and aircraft routing will be necessary once the staffing levels are achieved. We believe the importance of addressing these considerations soon is underscored by the Department's recent projection that air traffic in 1988 will increase by 5 to 6 percent, which is nearly double that anticipated a year ago.

FACTORS INFLUENCING THE PACE
OF STAFFING PROGRESS

Over the past 2 months we visited 6 of FAA's field facilities¹ to assess the factors that are affecting staffing progress, namely training, overtime, leave, and other work load requirements. These visits were part of our evaluation of FAA's controller staffing standards being done at the request of the Chairman, House Oversight and Investigations Subcommittee, Committee on Public Works and Transportation. We are grateful to Chairman Oberstar and his Subcommittee for allowing us to share our observations from these visits with you.

Training is a key factor affecting the pace of staffing. Progress to FPL can take up to 3 years, depending on a person's skills and the complexity of a facility's operations. FAA's training program begins at the FAA Academy where controller candidates undergo a 12-week training program. There are, however, a number of constraints which affect FAA's ability to develop an adequate and continuous pipeline of trainees. First, the number of trainees FAA has hired for the Academy has fluctuated in response to budgetary concerns. This year, for example, FAA had increased the size of its controller training classes to about 250 students per class. However, when funding became tight, FAA reduced the

¹Chicago Center, Chicago O'Hare, New York Center, New York Tracon, Philadelphia Terminal, and Washington Center.

size of the Academy's May and June training classes to an average of 176 students. Second, FAA experiences about 40 percent attrition of Academy trainees. Third, the number of Academy graduates is further reduced by another 15 to 20 percent when graduates subsequently fail or withdraw from training at the field facility level.

The magnitude of the current field training program places significant demands on the controller work force. As of June 30, 1987 about 3,300 controllers were in some stage of training at field facilities. On-the-job training of these developmentals is labor-intensive because it requires either an FPL or, in some cases, a qualified developmental instructor to work with and monitor each trainee being checked out on a position.

According to the facility managers we spoke with, managing training is particularly difficult when there is an uneven flow of trainees or an insufficient number of FPLs to provide training. At one facility we found that trainees have to wait several months before enough FPLs can be made available to begin teaching radar training and at another facility, an insufficient pool of trainees delayed the start of a training class for several weeks. Because of staffing needs at these facilities, developmental controllers who are qualified on one or more positions enter the regular shift rotation and, therefore, have less time to continue their training, slowing their progress to FPL status.

Managers at the facilities we visited also told us that the influx of developmental controllers and increased traffic activity will require additional overtime expenditures for operations and training. As shown in table 3, overtime expenditures have already exceeded the total spent in 1986 at four major facilities, and these expenditures FAA-wide are ahead of the same period in 1986. FAA headquarters, on the other hand, has been trying to reduce overtime expenditures, and some FAA regions have limited the hours available to facilities for the remainder of the year.

Several facilities we visited are currently hard-pressed, even using available overtime, to provide adequate position coverage while granting annual leave. Managers at both the New York and Washington Centers and Chicago O'Hare told us that they will be unable to approve more than 2 weeks of prime time annual leave for the current work force and, in some cases, have disapproved leave requests.

Additionally, current staffing levels are affecting managers' responses to planned system improvements, such as the Expanded East Coast Plan, which is designed to provide better use of the airspace by increasing airways along the East Coast. This plan represents a significant retraining and planning effort as well as a new work load for the facilities involved. Some facilities we visited in the Eastern Region, responsible for implementing this major

airspace change, have requested a postponement of implementation from November 1987 to March 1988 in order to provide more time for training and preparation and to improve their FPL staffing position before going into this major airspace change. These facility managers believe that without additional preparation time, implementation in November could adversely affect their operations. FAA has not yet decided whether to proceed with a November implementation.

Moreover, future attrition is a concern in the field. As of June 30, 1987, about 1,400 FPLs and first line supervisors at centers and terminal facilities were eligible to retire. Facility managers expressed the concern that if the Congress changes the federal retirement program, especially the tax treatment of lump sum retirement payments, as is currently under consideration, many eligible staff will elect retirement by the end of the year.

REHIRING FIRED CONTROLLERS

The House has passed legislation requiring that FAA reach an FPL staffing level of 10,350 by September 30, 1988. This would be an increase of about 740 FPLs over what FAA has now, a major challenge in view of the fact that FAA was only able to achieve a 100 FPL increase between October and June 30 this fiscal year. Rehiring the fired controllers has been proposed as a way of increasing the FPL work force relatively quickly. FAA managers

have estimated that training a rehired controller could take from 4 to 6 months--considerably less time than the time required to bring a new recruit to the full performance level.

Last summer at the request of this Committee we surveyed the controller work force to determine their attitudes toward rehiring the controllers fired as a result of participating in the 1981 strike.² About 60 percent of the controllers, supervisors, and staff and 85 percent of the managers who responded to our survey opposed rehiring any of the fired controllers.³ The primary reasons given why fired controllers should not be rehired were that it would hurt morale, cause bad feelings between strikers and non-strikers, and that there would be no fair way to selectively rehire these controllers. We also asked what the work force's experience had been with fired controllers who have been reinstated as a result of appeal. About half of those responding said that their morale was negatively affected at the time the reinstated controllers returned, but two-thirds reported that, as of last summer, reinstated controllers had positive or no impact on morale. Thus, the impact on controller morale based on experience with a limited number of reinstated employees appears to diminish with time.

2FAA Staffing: The Air Traffic Control Work Force Opposes Rehiring Fired Controllers, (GAO/RCED-87-32BR, October 9, 1986)

³GAO surveyed 3,050 members of the air traffic work force and 74 facility managers using a stratified random sample. GAO received responses from 2,391 employees (78 percent) and 69 managers (93 percent).

We asked the current work force about possible conditions for rehiring the fired controllers. Eighty percent or more of those responding favored no accumulation of seniority or back pay for time spent by the fired controllers away from federal service, job protection for current controllers, and a specified probationary period during which rehired controllers would not be eligible for supervisory promotion. Over 80 percent of the 429 fired controllers who responded said that they would probably return given these conditions. These fired controllers also favored returning to the same facility at the same grade level as they were assigned before the strike. Whether this potential source of air traffic controllers is drawn upon, however, is a policy decision for the Congress and the administration.

SIMILAR PROBLEMS FACING FAA'S MAINTENANCE

WORK FORCE

The staffing problems we have discussed today are long-term and not unique to FAA's controller work force. We recently completed an evaluation of staffing for the maintenance of the air traffic control system for the Chairman, Subcommittee on Aviation, House Committee on Public Works and Transportation. Our work shows that critical shortages of maintenance technicians currently exist in the field and that over 2,500 of the existing work force will be eligible to retire by 1990. It takes from 2 to 5 years to train an

FAA technician, yet FAA currently does not have an adequate training pipeline in place to replace these losses. In part because of the staffing priorities given to controller and aviation inspector staffing, maintenance staffing has fallen to a level well below the field's work load as projected by FAA's maintenance staffing standard. The impact of these reduced staffing levels is evident in reduced levels of routine maintenance accomplishment and in an increase in flight delays from equipment failures.

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In summary, we believe that FAA is clearly moving in the right direction by both hiring and training more controllers. However, there are no overnight solutions to the problems FAA is experiencing in increasing both its controller and technician work forces. As progress continues, we believe that DOT needs to explain the linkages between its rebuilding efforts and the level of service that the air traffic control system can reasonably be expected to provide. When this is clarified, there will be an improved frame of reference for judging how many controllers will be enough.

This concludes my prepared statement. I will be pleased to respond to any questions at this time.

TABLE 1: CONTROLLER STAFFING

	<u>7/31/81</u> Pre-strike	<u>8/3/81</u> Post-strike	<u>9/30/86</u>	<u>6/30/87</u>
FPLs	13,205	3,429	9,528	9,617
Develop- mentals	3,039 _____	592 _____	3,761 _____	4,015 _____
	16,244	4,021	13,289	13,632

SOURCE: FAA, Personnel Management Information System

Note:

FPLs or full performance controllers are those who are certified on all positions of operation within a defined area.

Developmental controllers include some Academy students as well as those undergoing training at field facilities.

TABLE 2: CONTROLLER STAFFING AT SELECTED FACILITIES

<u>Centers</u>	On-board staff as of July 4, 1987	
	<u>Controllersa</u>	<u>FPLs</u>
Albuquerque	257	181
Atlanta	348	314
Boston	288	182
Chicago	396	190
Cleveland	417	239
Denver	286	195
Fort Worth	321	220
Houston	303	210
Indianapolis	284	147
Jacksonville	329	208
Kansas City	315	210
Los Angeles	311	175
Memphis	274	175
Miami	226	139
Minneapolis	254	154
New York	283	174
Oakland	289	148
Salt Lake	171	117
Seattle	207	137
Washington	331	236
<u>Terminals</u>		
Atlanta	78	77
Boston	49	34
Chicago/O'Hare	91	85
Cleveland	35	25
Dallas	88	88
Denver	56	54
Detroit	56	49
Fort Lauderdale	19	17
Houston	48	48
Kansas City	35	34
Kennedy	24	18
La Guardia	28	18
Las Vegas	33	33
Los Angeles	65	54
Miami	69	61

<u>Terminals</u>	<u>On-board staff as of July 4, 1987</u>	
	<u>Controllers^a</u>	<u>FPLs</u>
Minneapolis/St. Paul	51	48
Newark	28	23
Philadelphia	55	43
Pittsburgh	56	42
San Francisco	23	21
St. Louis	50	37
Washington National	48	39

^aIncludes developmental and FPL controllers only.

SOURCE: FAA, Personnel Management Information System

TABLE 3: OVERTIME HOURS, FISCAL YEAR 1984-87

<u>Centers</u>	<u>FY 1984</u>	<u>FY 1985</u>	<u>FY 1986</u>	<u>FY 1987a</u>
Albuquerque	15,321	13,851	6,704	3,765
Atlanta	44,136	48,882	33,232	15,197
Boston	4,781	5,162	13,684	28,128
Chicago	48,955	70,274	46,583	27,843
Cleveland	46,955	56,614	40,925	23,206
Denver	49,467	40,586	18,682	8,896
Fort Worth	38,005	30,072	9,413	5,626
Houston	24,450	12,491	5,645	3,404
Indianapolis	26,596	36,976	24,728	13,492
Jacksonville	23,193	16,800	12,484	9,643
Kansas City	45,737	34,148	25,682	13,902
Los Angeles	35,528	25,515	25,034	14,179
Memphis	33,421	23,619	19,686	13,295
Miami	12,446	8,994	7,686	4,663
Minneapolis	27,118	26,549	19,947	9,355
New York	60,430	54,202	36,934	12,502
Oakland	33,320	24,949	21,127	10,971
Salt Lake	15,958	11,812	5,847	3,607
Seattle	19,560	8,428	4,423	4,612
Washington	50,188	41,725	39,889	24,657
<u>Terminals</u>				
Atlanta	5,554	8,444	4,410	4,268
Boston	5,962	5,168	6,245	5,375
Chicago	27,866	21,077	12,795	19,913
Cleveland	1,744	1,413	1,632	607
Dallas-Fort Worth	6,417	6,852	2,164	898
Denver	2,354	2,206	1,669	1,456
Detroit	6,965	5,400	4,419	3,882
Fort Lauderdale	1,431	997	739	417
Houston	4,507	2,641	1,544	1,377
Kansas City	2,663	3,027	1,921	1,501
Kennedy	3,246	2,948	1,469	1,170
La Guardia	4,763	1,916	954	455
Las Vegas	4,085	3,363	3,415	2,896
Los Angeles	9,527	7,780	7,694	6,697
Miami	6,185	5,178	3,803	1,730
Minneapolis	3,621	4,015	3,572	2,313
Newark	1,694	1,658	1,025	682
Philadelphia	3,090	1,619	1,957	3,475
Pittsburgh	11,101	8,290	2,872	1,857
San Francisco	1,752	1,272	1,340	1,000
St. Louis	5,504	5,459	5,393	2,897
Washington National	520	271	140	140

aActual through pay period 13--June 20, 1987,

SOURCE: FAA