

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

September 9, 2022

Acting Administrator Billy Nolen
Federal Aviation Administration
800 Independence Avenue, S.W.
Washington, DC 20591

Dear Acting Administrator Nolen,

I write to urge you to implement key transparency measures in order to strengthen America's air traffic control (ATC) workforce and bolster resiliency in the National Airspace System (NAS).

As you know, air travel this summer has been significantly disrupted by flight cancellations and delays. According to data from flight tracking site FlightAware, 48,000 US flights were canceled between May 27, the Friday before Memorial Day, and August 14. That figure represents 2.3 percent of the flights scheduled. During that same period, nearly 483,000 US flights were delayed, or roughly 24 percent of flights. I recognize that these operational challenges have multifaceted causes, including airline staffing shortages largely resulting from the pandemic and particularly severe weather events this summer. However, understaffing at critical ATC facilities has also played a role in many flight delays and cancellations.

According to Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) data, in 2011, there were over 11,750 fully certified controllers (CPCs) and additional trainees yielding over 15,000 total controllers on-board. FAA staffing of ATC facilities has since failed to keep up with attrition, resulting in a reduction of over 1,000 certified controllers tasked with monitoring and ensuring the safe and efficient movement of aircraft in the NAS. As you know, staffing shortages at certain facilities can lead to stress on the frontline workforce and negatively affect operations.

In particular, I am concerned that FAA's Controller Workforce Plan (CWP) appears to rely on overall "headcount" for facility staffing ranges, which includes CPCs and trainees. In some cases, this gives the appearance that a facility is appropriately staffed when in fact the facility is below the staffing range when you exclude trainees. I understand that these shortfalls can be even more pronounced when you compare the CPCs at a facility to CPC operational staffing targets that were jointly developed by FAA's Air Traffic Organization and the National Air Traffic Controllers Association.

Addressing staffing challenges across the National Airspace System requires a fully transparent assessment of facility staffing levels, including data on attrition and anticipated attrition. In addition, FAA should work collaboratively with representatives of the controller workforce to regularly update CPC operational staffing targets for each ATC facility to ensure safe and efficient operation. FAA and the workforce representatives should collaborate to set trainee targets in order to achieve and maintain the CPC targets in light of anticipated attrition. I believe FAA should report these data as part of its annual report to Congress on ATC staffing.

Including these details in the FAA's annual Controller Workforce Plan would better inform Congress by providing greater transparency and it would assist us in addressing the staffing shortages at various ATC facilities across the country.

Thank you for your attention to this matter. I stand ready to work with you to support our controller workforce and mitigate travel disruptions for millions of Americans.

Sincerely,



Jeanne Shaheen
United States Senator

CC: Pete Buttigieg, Secretary of Transportation