

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

February 12, 2025

Acting Administrator Chris Rochelau
Federal Aviation Administration
800 Independence Avenue, S.W.
Washington, DC 20591

Dear Acting Administrator Rochelau,

On January 29th, Reagan National Airport (DCA) saw the deadliest commercial aviation incident on U.S. soil in more than 23 years. In light of this horrifying loss of life, we write to emphasize the urgent need to address air traffic controller staffing shortages as part of any response to the events that took place on January 29, 2025.

Although this incident was horrifying, it was unfortunately not unimaginable. In recent years, near-misses at airports across the country have increased – and the incident at DCA has been particularly distressing. In both April and May of 2024, runway incidents were very narrowly avoided, due in no small part to the heroic actions of the certified professional controllers (CPCs) staffing the tower. Managing overcrowding, delays, and close calls is nothing new for air traffic controllers at DCA, which has the busiest runway in the country.

The full investigation must be allowed to run its course. To be clear, we do not write to imply that understaffing was a primary cause of the collision. However, in light of the FAA's preliminary report, it is clear that any response to the underlying causes of this tragedy – whatever they may be – must include support for our nation's dedicated aviation safety professionals and result in significant investments in our CPC workforce. Last year, the FAA Reauthorization Act of 2024 included language requiring the FAA to adopt a new air traffic controller staffing model. The FAA has made good progress in hiring as a result, but as of this month, they were still more than 3,500 controllers short of their overall staffing target.

As of the most recent FAA data, DCA's tower has only 25 fully-certified CPCs, well below the CWRG's 30-CPC target. Although this is an improvement from numbers reported in 2023, controller staffing has otherwise largely declined or remained stagnant since 2016, despite record-setting passenger counts each non-pandemic year. As in many places across the country, DCA's controllers often work six-day weeks and ten-hour days. The fatigue and stress that they regularly experience as a result of this substantial workload will only grow worse unless we take significant and long overdue measures.

We know the FAA understands the need to increase controller staffing: the agency raised their hiring goal to onboard a projected 17,125 controllers through Fiscal Year 2033. However, turning those goals into reality is far more challenging. According to the FAA, only 60% of controller trainees reach full certification within three years. And despite meeting self-imposed yearly staffing targets, attrition continues to keep pace with new hires.

We ask that you work with Congress and the National Air Traffic Controllers Association to increase funding for operations, modernize facilities and equipment, expand the FAA training academy's capacity, strengthen partnerships with aviation schools across the country and other ways to prevent partisan brinksmanship around government funding from shutting down operations. Furthermore, we ask that you allow the investigation to run its course before taking any precipitous actions that undermine safety, and work closely with Congress on any changes you take as the FAA responds to this tragedy.

For the sake of America's traveling public, we can and must do better. At a minimum, we must commit to doing all we can to reinforce our CPC workforce and keep tragedies like this from becoming commonplace. We stand ready to work closely with you and your Administration to do everything in our power to prevent this from happening again.

Sincerely,

Sincerely,

Handwritten signature of Jeanne Shaheen in blue ink.

Jeanne Shaheen
United States Senator

Handwritten signature of John Hoeven in black ink.

John Hoeven
United States Senator

CC: Sean Duffy, Secretary of Transportation