

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

March 14, 2023

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

Dear Acting Administrator Nolen,

As you work to convene an aviation safety summit on March 15th, I write to emphasize the critical need to address air traffic controller staffing shortages in any comprehensive plan to bolster the safety of our National Airspace System (NAS).

I appreciate that the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) and the National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB) have committed to duly investigate the recent incidents involving runway incursions. As you know, these incidents often involve several causal factors and I look forward to reviewing the forthcoming reports on these events and the recommendations for strengthening the FAA's safety protocols and procedures. However, the number of runway incursions recorded by the FAA has increased in recent years. According to FAA data, in 2022 the total number of runway incursions across the U.S. was 1,732, up from the 1,397 incursions reported a decade ago in 2012, and the 987 reported in 2002. While the particular failures that contributed to the most recent incidents remain subject to investigation, ultimately, any effort to address the concerning rise of runway incursions and strengthen the safe and efficient use of the NAS must emphasize support for our nation's dedicated aviation safety professionals.

Despite meeting its self-imposed hiring goals for much of the past decade, the FAA has not kept pace with attrition rates of certified professional controllers (CPCs). Consequently, as of the end of Fiscal Year (FY) 2022, FAA data indicates there were 1,200 fewer working CPCs than a decade earlier. In the FY 2022 Air Traffic Controller Workforce Plan, the FAA raised its hiring goal to onboard a projected 9,850 new controllers through FY 2031. I commend the Administration for this positive step forward. However, according to FAA data, only 60 percent of all controller trainees reach full certification within three years, as such, any increased hiring will take several years to have an impact on overall CPC personnel levels. As you know, staffing shortages at individual facilities can cause disruptions across the NAS and can lead to stress on our nation's controller workforce.

I am pleased that the FAA has committed to working with the CPC workforce through the Collaborative Resource Workgroup to conduct improved assessments of controller workforce needs on a facility-by-facility basis. Thorough and accurate evaluations of workforce needs, including information on anticipated attrition, are necessary to meet the operational needs of the NAS, enable NAS modernization and ensure the continued safety of America's traveling public. Still, more must be done to strengthen the CPC workforce pipeline, improve training outcomes and address challenges that contribute to premature attrition.

I believe the March 15 summit should emphasize the foundational role our air traffic controllers have in the safe and efficient operation of the NAS. Strengthening our CPC workforce must be a part of any plan to avoid future incidents like those that prompted this summit and I stand ready to work with you to address these workforce challenges.

Sincerely,



Jeanne Shaheen
United States Senator

CC: Pete Buttigieg, Secretary of Transportation