

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

December 19, 2023

Administrator Michael Whitaker
Federal Aviation Administration
800 Independence Avenue, S.W.
Washington, DC 20591

Dear Administrator Whitaker,

I write to share my concern for the wellbeing of the FAA's air traffic controller workforce. On December 2nd, the New York Times published an article detailing the deeply troubling and unsustainable working conditions of our nation's controllers. According to this article, these conditions, such as long hours and irregular work schedules, presently contribute to fatigue, deteriorated mental health and increased substance misuse among these vital workers.¹ As I am sure you are aware, these concerns have also been raised in the November report issued by the National Airspace Safety Review Team (SRT), particularly as they relate to the impact of chronic understaffing at air traffic control facilities.²

I am pleased that the FAA formed the independent SRT in response to the numerous runway incursion events experienced last summer, and I urge the FAA to implement the recommendations included in the November report to address the pressing safety risks posed to the National Airspace System (NAS). In particular, it is critical that the FAA implement recommendations included in the report to address understaffing of certified professional controllers. As the SRT reports, current staffing levels have led to historic overtime rates – leading to increased fatigue and mental health concerns that have resulted in preventable human errors.

In addition to the assessment conducted by the SRT, I urge the FAA to thoroughly review measures in place to address controller fatigue, burnout and general physical and mental wellbeing. The personal accounts reported by the New York Times reflect a dire level of occupational stress that imperils the health of every controller employed by the FAA and jeopardizes the safety of America's traveling public. These accounts must be treated seriously and met with a focused effort to address unsustainable controller workload and increase mental health resources and support.

To better understand how the FAA is working to address these challenges, I would appreciate your attention and prompt response to the following questions:

¹ Emily Steel and Sydney Ember. "Drunk and Asleep on the Job: Air Traffic Controllers Pushed to the Brink." The New York Times, December 2, 2023. <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/12/02/business/air-traffic-controllers-safety.html>.

² National Airspace System Safety Review Team: Discussion and Recommendations To Address Risk in the National Airspace System, November 2023. https://www.faa.gov/NAS_safety_review_team_report.pdf.

1. Which of the SRT's recommendations is the FAA planning to implement? What is the timeline for implementation?
2. What measures are currently in place to identify and address controller fatigue, substance misuse and mental or physical health concerns?
3. What measures are needed to strengthen controller hiring, training and certification to address understaffing?

I appreciate your attention to this important issue and stand ready to work with you in addressing these concerns.

Sincerely,



Jeanne Shaheen
United States Senator

CC:

Pete Buttigieg, Secretary of Transportation

Rich Santa, President - National Air Traffic Controllers Association