

Congress of the United States

Washington, DC 20515

February 7, 2024

The Honorable Michael Whitaker
Administrator
Federal Aviation Administration
United States Department of Transportation
800 Independence Avenue, SW
Washington, D.C. 20004

Dear Administrator Whitaker:

We are concerned about the Federal Aviation Administration's (FAA's) approach to ensuring aviation professionals can obtain mental health care in a timely and efficient manner. It is clear to us that talented aviation professionals – our constituents – often suffer in silence because of the fear that medical evaluation, diagnosis, or treatment, could potentially prolong their return to work, or even prevent them from pursuing their aviation careers.¹ Medical standards help ensure safety in the National Airspace System (NAS); however, they cannot be so cumbersome or potentially punitive as to prevent healthy aviation professionals from having the ability to work. The timely development and implementation of policies, protocols, and screening methods that enable and encourage individuals to get the care they need is imperative.

Mental health in United States aviation was recently cast into the spotlight following troubling reports about the struggles that commercial pilots have with mental health and the stressors placed on air traffic controllers who both must be medically cleared to perform their duties.² While we strongly support the FAA's recommitment to addressing stigma regarding mental health through the establishment of the Mental Health and Aviation Medical Clearances Rulemaking Committee (ARC) and the Air Traffic Controller Fatigue Panel, valuable time cannot be wasted by simply restating what previous findings have already been uncovered.³

¹ Andrea Sachs, *Pilots hide mental health issues so they don't 'lose their wings'*, WASH. POST, (Dec. 15, 2023), available at <https://www.washingtonpost.com/travel/2023/12/15/pilots-mental-health-faa-certification/>.

² Emily Steel and Sydney Ember, *Drunk and asleep on the job: Air traffic controllers pushed to the brink*, THE N. Y. TIMES, (Dec. 2, 2023), available at <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/12/02/business/air-traffic-controllers-safety.html>.

³ See e.g. FAA, *FAA Statement on Mental Health and Aviation Medical Clearances Rulemaking Committee*, (Dec. 5, 2023), available at <https://www.faa.gov/newsroom/faa-statement-mental-health-and-aviation-medical-clearances-rulemaking-committee>; FAA, *FAA Moves to Address Air Traffic Controller Fatigue*, (Dec. 20, 2023), available at <https://www.faa.gov/newsroom/faa-moves-address-air-traffic-controller-fatigue>; UNITED STATES DEP'T OF TRANSP. OFF. OF INSPECTOR GEN., AV2023038, *FAA CONDUCTS COMPREHENSIVE EVALUATIONS OF PILOTS WITH MENTAL HEALTH CHALLENGES, BUT OPPORTUNITIES EXIST TO FURTHER MITIGATE SAFETY RISKS*, (July 12, 2023), available at https://www.oig.dot.gov/sites/default/files/FAA%20Pilot%20Mental%20Health%20Final%20Report_07.12.2023.pdf [hereinafter *OIG Report*].

These entities must be tasked with putting forward concrete and actionable solutions to break down the barriers so professionals can seek care, while also maintaining rigorous safety standards.⁴ Anything less is a disservice to our dedicated aviation workforce, as well as individuals aspiring to join this growing sector.

We commend the FAA's recent targeted efforts to improve aeromedical decision-making regarding mental health, including hiring additional mental health practitioners to improve the Agency's expertise, increasing mental health training for aviation medical examiners (AMEs), supporting research on pilot mental health, and other policy changes.⁵ However, the Agency's backlog of decisions and reviews for aviation professionals that have sought mental health care persists and continues to strain the Agency's resources. Long medical clearance wait times are not only severely disruptive to an individual's career but may also be a contributing factor discouraging other aviation professionals from self-disclosing mental health conditions.⁶ Such issues have led to distrust, frustration, and uncertainty between the Agency and the aviation community and present formidable challenges to the future of United States aviation.

To address these issues, the FAA must modernize its mental health protocols and foster an environment where aviation professionals feel supported to seek treatment. As today's young adults are more apt to openly discuss their mental health, we must be careful to not alienate any future workforce by continuing with a culture of stigma and fear of termination or denial.⁷ The resolution of these issues is crucial for reinforcing our aviation workforce pipelines and promoting a culture of transparency and well-being within the aviation ecosystem while simultaneously ensuring we maintain the highest degree of safety in the NAS.

In anticipation of growing workforce needs and challenges, Section 328 of the House-passed *Securing Growth and Robust Leadership in American Aviation Act* requires the FAA to establish an Aeromedical Innovation and Modernization Working Group to improve the Agency's aeromedical decision-making and ensure alignment with modern medical practices.⁸ This section also emphasizes supporting pilot mental health, and we are pleased to see the FAA get a jumpstart on such a directive through the establishment of the Mental Health and Aviation Medical Clearances ARC.⁹ In carrying out its charter, the committee should hear from experts across the aviation and medical communities to ensure a wide range of perspectives are considered.

⁴ FAA, *Mental Health and Aviation Medical Clearances Aviation Rulemaking Committee*, (charter effective Dec. 4, 2023), available at https://www.faa.gov/regulations_policies/rulemaking/committees/documents/media/Pilot-Mental-Health-ARC-Charter_12042023.pdf [hereinafter *Mental Health and Aviation Medical Clearances ARC*].

⁵ FAA, *Pilot Mental Fitness*, (last updated Nov. 6, 2023), available at <https://www.faa.gov/pilot-mental-fitness>.

⁶ OIG Report, *supra* note 3.

⁷ Terry Collins, *Is Gen Z sad? Study shows they're more open about struggles with mental health*, USA TODAY, (Sep. 14, 2023), available at <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2023/09/14/gen-z-open-about-mental-health/70853469007/>.

⁸ *Securing Growth and Robust Leadership in American Aviation Act*, H.R. 3935, 118th Cong. (2023).

⁹ *Id.*; *Mental Health and Aviation Medical Clearances ARC*, *supra* note 4.

The United States aviation industry's perception of mental health must evolve, not only for the benefit of our workforce, but also to ensure public safety, both in the air and on the ground. We urge the FAA to take decisive actions to reduce the stigma around mental health care in aviation, make meaningful changes to remove barriers without jeopardizing safety standards, reduce aeromedical decision wait times, and ultimately strengthen trust with our aviation workforce.

Thank you for your prompt attention to this important issue. If you have any questions, please contact the Subcommittee on Aviation, Majority Staff, at 202-226-3220 and Subcommittee on Aviation, Minority Staff, at 202-225-9161.

Sincerely,



Garret Graves
Chairman
Subcommittee on Aviation



Steve Cohen
Ranking Member
Subcommittee on Aviation



Sam Graves
Chairman
Committee on Transportation
and Infrastructure



Rick Larsen
Ranking Member
Committee on Transportation
and Transportation



Colin Allred
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Brian J. Mast
Member of Congress



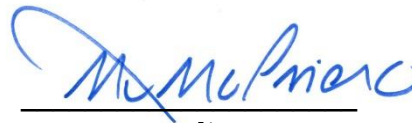
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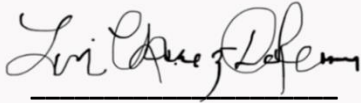
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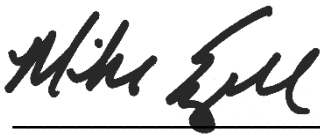
Mary Sattler Peltola
Member of Congress



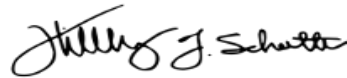
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Mike Ezell
Member of Congress



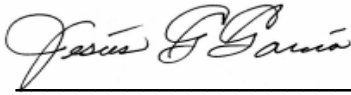
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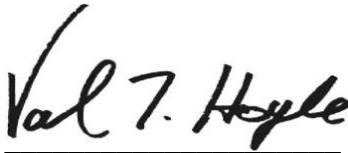
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Jenniffer González-Colón
Member of Congress



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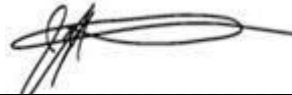
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Member of Congress



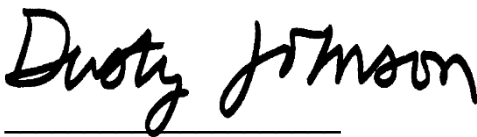
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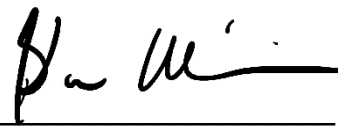
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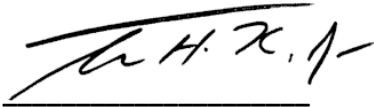
Daniel Webster
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Brandon Williams
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Handwritten signature of Thomas H. Kean, Jr. in black ink, featuring a stylized 'T' and 'K'.

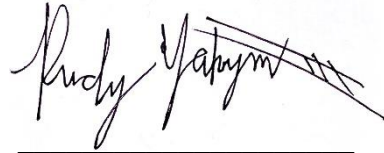
Thomas H. Kean, Jr.
Member of Congress

Handwritten signature of Frederica S. Wilson in blue ink, written in a cursive style.

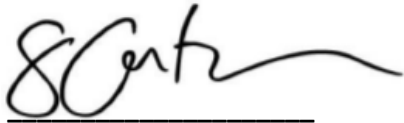
Frederica S. Wilson
Member of Congress

Handwritten signature of Tracey Mann in blue ink, written in a cursive style.

Tracey Mann
Member of Congress

Handwritten signature of Rudy Yakym, III in black ink, written in a cursive style.

Rudy Yakym, III
Member of Congress

Handwritten signature of Sean Casten in black ink, written in a cursive style.

Sean Casten
Member of Congress