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# **PROFESSIONAL AVIATION SAFETY SPECIALISTS**

1200 G Street NW, Suite 750, Washington, DC 20005  
Telephone: (202) 293-7277 Fax: (202) 293-7727

**STATEMENT OF DAVID SPERO  
PRESIDENT  
PROFESSIONAL AVIATION SAFETY SPECIALISTS, AFL-CIO  
BEFORE THE HOUSE COMMITTEE ON TRANSPORTATION &  
INFRASTRUCTURE, SUBCOMMITTEE ON AVIATION  
ON  
ELIMINATING BOTTLENECKS: EXAMINING OPPORTUNITIES TO  
RECRUIT, RETAIN, AND ENGAGE AVIATION TALENT  
JULY 10, 2024**

Chair Graves, Ranking Member Cohen, and members of the subcommittee, thank you for inviting me to testify on behalf of the Professional Aviation Safety Specialists, AFL-CIO (PASS).

PASS represents approximately 11,000 Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) and Department of Defense employees throughout the United States and abroad. PASS-represented employees in the FAA install, maintain, support and certify air traffic control and national defense equipment, inspect and oversee the commercial and general aviation industries, develop flight procedures, and perform quality analyses of complex aviation systems used in air traffic control and national defense in the United States and overseas. PASS members work to ensure the safety and efficiency of the aviation system that transports over 2.9 million airline passengers across more than 29 million square miles of airspace (domestic and U.S. airspace over oceans) every day. The diversity of the PASS-represented workforce provides insight into the safety of the system they maintain and the industry they oversee. PASS members are tasked with ensuring that the U.S. aviation system remains the gold standard of safety.

PASS thanks the members of the subcommittee for turning their attention toward examining opportunities to recruit, retain and engage aviation talent. As PASS has long emphasized, the FAA cannot accomplish its safety mission without the right number of employees in the necessary positions. Unfortunately, our workforce faces many challenges that hinder the ability to ensure adequate staffing.

It is worth noting that PASS is currently in negotiations on new collective bargaining agreements with the FAA for the employees we represent in the Air Traffic Organization and Aviation Safety. These negotiations present a significant opportunity for PASS to work with the agency on ways to enhance recruitment and retention.

PASS appreciates the opportunity to share information and recommendations regarding the FAA workforce. This includes the Air Traffic Organization and Aviation Safety workforces, staffing challenges at the FAA, and PASS's recommendations for eliminating bottlenecks, which includes oversight of important FAA legislation recently enacted.

### **AIR TRAFFIC ORGANIZATION**

The largest PASS bargaining unit is the Air Traffic Organization (ATO) Technical Operations unit, consisting of technical employees who install, maintain, repair and certify the radar, navigation, communication and power equipment that comprises the U.S. National Airspace System (NAS).

Within Technical Operations, PASS represents FAA airway transportation systems specialists, more commonly referred to as technicians. Technicians ensure the functionality of communications, computers, navigational aids and power systems vital to safe air travel and the mission of pilots and air traffic controllers. PASS-represented employees in Flight Program Operations (AJF), Mission Support Services (AJV) and Air Traffic (AJT) also provide important support to the system by conducting flight inspections, developing instrument flight procedures and other important work.

## *Technical Operations Staffing*

There are approximately 4,800 FAA technicians responsible for installing, operating, maintaining and repairing more than 74,000 radar, communications, navigational aids, airport lighting, backup power, heating, ventilation and air conditioning (HVAC) at FAA facilities.<sup>1</sup> This number of employees has been on a consistent decline for years, helped in part by the increasing number of retirements.

Insufficient technician staffing can result in increased restoration times during an outage and more air traffic delays. It can also make it difficult to ensure adequate shift coverage by technicians, a situation that increases the risk of major air traffic issues. In fact, an analysis performed by the FAA NAS Policy & Quality Control Group found disturbing connections between the number of FAA technicians and the frequency and duration of corrective maintenance (LCM) actions. The analysis states that the agency has lost approximately 8% of the technician workforce since 2017 and that this “loss of experienced technicians correlates with the rise in longer times to complete preventative maintenance and the increase in LCM number and LCM duration.”<sup>2</sup> Performing preventative maintenance is essential to avoiding system disruptions, with the data from the report indicating that the average number of unscheduled outages per facility has been trending upward since 2017.

While the media focuses on the shortage of air traffic controllers when reporting on non-weather-related flight delays, the shortage of FAA systems specialists is just as acute. This lack of technician staffing is not going unnoticed. For example, in April, a group of Texas lawmakers sent a letter to the FAA administrator regarding the inadequate staffing in the San Antonio System Support Center (SSC). The specific concern related to the number of qualified and credentialed radar technicians at the facility. There is only one full-time technician to service three radar sites between 120 and 200 miles away from the San Antonio airport. The representatives urged the FAA to work to “mitigate staffing shortages by hiring, training, and certifying technical staff to be ready to assume those critical radar maintenance duties as technicians retire.”<sup>3</sup> Although the situation rose to a level of congressional inquiry, it is certainly not an anomaly.

In addition, inadequate staffing has resulted in PASS-represented employees being unable to serve on important agency groups and initiatives. PASS has long called attention to not only the need for sufficient technical staffing but also to the lack of a reliable staffing model on which to base staffing decisions and placement.

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<sup>1</sup> Federal Aviation Administration, Airway Transportation Systems Specialists, updated October 6, 2022. Accessed July 3, 2024: [https://www.faa.gov/jobs/career\\_fields/aviation\\_careers/atss\\_join](https://www.faa.gov/jobs/career_fields/aviation_careers/atss_join). This number does not reflect the number of technicians that are fully certified.

<sup>2</sup> Federal Aviation Administration, NAS Policy & Quality Control Group, NAS Technical Performance & Analysis Team: AJW-184, “Impacts on Maintenance,” p. 5.

<sup>3</sup> Letter to FAA Administrator Mike Whitaker from Reps. Greg Casar, Joaquin Castro and Henry Cuellar on radar technician staffing, April 10, 2024.

PASS is currently in contract negotiations with ATO over a new collective bargaining agreement. PASS views this as an opportunity to develop processes and incentives better aimed at recruiting and retaining employees throughout the ATO.

### ***Technical Operations Training***

Hiring and training new technicians is not a quick or easy process. FAA technicians must be skilled and proficient on a number of systems. It can take years to fully train an FAA technician to perform all necessary duties related to the position. According to the Department of Transportation Inspector General (IG), “Most FAA systems require specific training and certification, and FAA does not typically train maintenance technicians on every equipment type. Therefore, individual maintenance technicians cannot work on all equipment, increasing the complexity of the technician workforce planning effort.”<sup>4</sup>

Since there are so many different pieces of equipment and systems in the NAS, there must be several technicians on site who can do the different work necessary to keep the aviation system safe and functioning. In other words, the staffing of this workforce is not just about people; it is about people with the right skills and training.

PASS consistently hears from our members that adequate training is a recurring issue and that without proper training, there is an increased risk to aviation safety. Many factors impact the ability to fully train FAA technicians, including availability of travel funding, instructor availability and course development. In addition, the FAA is still playing catch up after its training academy in Oklahoma City was shuttered during the COVID-19 pandemic. While the agency did turn to some virtual coursework, it is a poor substitute for hands-on training with actual equipment. It can take years to fully train an FAA technician to perform all necessary duties related to the position.

Another detriment to adequate training is the number of employees who are nearing retirement. These skilled systems specialists have valuable knowledge and experience that can benefit new employees. However, the FAA is not hiring in a manner that would take advantage of this institutional knowledge. The agency hires only when a position becomes vacant. This is obviously impacting staffing levels at facilities nationwide. There needs to be a continuous investment in employee training and development programs to enhance skills and knowledge.

### ***Technical Operations Workforce Plan***

The FAA has been developing the Technical Operations staffing model (TSM) for over a decade. In 2018, the IG noted the lack of progress: “The Agency also lacks a comprehensive workforce plan to address hiring and training needs for its entire technical workforce. In addition, FAA does not currently account for planned retirements or track how long it takes on average to train new technicians, data that would be useful for determining future training and hiring needs.”<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Department of Transportation Inspector General, *Opportunities Exist for FAA To Strengthen Its Workforce Planning and Training Processes for Maintenance Technicians*, Report No. AV2023027, May 2, 2023, p. 6.

<sup>5</sup> *Id.*, p. 8

The FAA's TSM only addresses the technical employees in the field who perform preventative maintenance and cannot be relied upon to address staffing for other duties they perform. These other duties include work related to unscheduled outages; corrective maintenance in the case of outages or disruptions; tasks related to specific technical disciplines, such as Communication or Radar; labor reporting and other administrative tasks, which are necessary to accurately track the work being done; travel time (technicians may be responsible for facilities located in remote locations or multiple locations); among others. Due to staffing insufficiencies, PASS often hears of incidents in which a facility has fallen below the coverage requirements for a watch schedule. The model also does not reflect the work performed by support personnel who are not directly interfacing with live NAS equipment and systems. Furthermore, the model does not consider many human factors. PASS does not believe that the TSM is a reliable tool for determining staffing for this workforce. In addition, the administrative program for tracking these duties is burdensome and difficult to manage.

PASS is asking that the FAA be directed to establish a Technical Operations Workforce Plan and collaborate with PASS in its creation and implementation. PASS believes that the abilities and skills that Tech Ops employees provide, if utilized and staffed properly, can provide a distinct improvement in the implementation of new NAS systems. The development of the Technical Operations Workforce Plan should serve as a model for other plans to follow for Mission Support Services and Flight Program Operations.

Of utmost importance, the agency must be directed to collaboratively work with PASS on the creation of any workforce plan. While PASS has made it clear to the FAA that we are ready and willing to assist in the development of a plan, our offers have been declined or ignored.

## **AVIATION SAFETY**

PASS represents aviation safety inspectors and other employees within the Office of Aviation Safety (AVS). Flight Standards Service (AFS) and Aircraft Certification Service (AIR). Aviation safety inspectors are responsible for certification, education, oversight, surveillance and enforcement of the entire aviation system.

### ***Funding Challenges***

PASS thanks the Committee for passing the Aircraft Certification Safety and Accountability Act in late 2021, in which Congress authorized \$81 million to recruit and retain safety specialists related to certification. Unfortunately, Congress did not follow through on its directive and failed to appropriate the money. While PASS was encouraged by the language in the law, it did not actually accomplish any recruitment or retention goals because there were no appropriated funds.

### ***Aviation Safety Inspector Staffing***

PASS is extremely concerned about the agency's inability to effectively and consistently staff the FAA inspector workforce. In fact, according to a 2021 report by the Department of Transportation Inspector General (IG), an alarming 59% and 79% of Certificate Management Office and Flight Standards District Office managers, respectively, said their offices are short-

staffed.<sup>6</sup> Among the reasons cited in the IG report for understaffing are the same reasons cited by PASS over the years. These include increasing workload, hiring challenges, extended hiring and training periods, and increasing oversight responsibility (including for the evolving unmanned aerial system segment).

The agency itself has recognized the need to maintain a robust inspector workforce. According to the FAA, “To meet the safety needs of the NAS, AVS will need to recruit, hire, maintain, and retain a workforce with outstanding technical expertise, capabilities, and adaptability. Our efforts must ensure we can hire and retain the right people with the right skills and mindset, engaged at the right time, with systematic coordination between certification and operational suitability.”<sup>7</sup> PASS agrees with the FAA and we are eager to assist in the endeavor.

PASS also agrees with the FAA administrator’s June 13, 2024, testimony before the Senate Committee on Commerce, Science and Transportation where he encouraged stakeholders to provide mentoring to newer employees. “There has been a significant loss of experienced workers and a lack of that natural transfer of knowledge,” Administrator Mike Whitaker testified. “What we are encouraging operators in the system to do is recognize that as a risk and build programs around that to mitigate that risk, which means more training, more mentoring and more time to complete tasks.”<sup>8</sup> However, with inspector staffing at inadequate levels within the agency, this is a challenge with the current workforce.

As stated earlier, PASS is currently in contract negotiations with AVS for a new collective bargaining agreement. This should serve as a perfect vehicle to develop processes and incentives aimed at promoting recruiting and retention. One of the issues focused on is telework, which has become a major recruiting and retention tool. Aviation employees in the private sector, including those representing airlines, general aviation and pilot certification, value the flexibilities of telework offered by the industry. While the private sector is oftentimes the recruiting grounds for new FAA employees, these incentives must remain available to remain competitive with the private sector.

### ***Aviation Safety Inspector Staffing Model***

The “staffing model” currently being used by the agency is insufficient to determine the number of aviation safety inspectors needed. As noted by the IG in 2021, due to the model not including relevant inspector staffing data, it “will be limited in its ability to determine whether the model provides reliable information on projected inspector staffing levels.” The same report noted that managers are reluctant to use the model.

PASS is asking that the FAA be directed to revise its inspector staffing model in collaboration with the union. In light of recent events, it is more important than ever that the agency knows

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<sup>6</sup> U.S. Department of Transportation Office of Inspector General, *FAA Can Increase Its Inspector Staffing Model’s Effectiveness by Implementing System Improvements and Maximizing Its Capabilities*, August 11, 2021, p. 5.

<sup>7</sup> Federal Aviation Administration, *Aviation Safety Workforce Plan 2021-2030*, p. i.

<sup>8</sup> “FAA Oversight of Aviation Manufacturing,” Hearing before the Senate Committee on Commerce, Science and Transportation, June 13, 2024.

how many inspectors are needed to safely monitor the system. At the recent hearing before the Senate Commerce Committee regarding the agency's oversight of aviation manufacturing, FAA Administrator Whitaker recognized that the FAA was misguided in overseeing Boeing by being too "hands off." He acknowledged that the FAA should have had much better visibility into what was happening at Boeing.

The administrator did claim that the agency now had more inspectors on the ground at Boeing factories and the factory of its primary supplier. He explained that the FAA previously had 24 inspectors at Boeing and Spirit AeroSystems and, while the number is now in the low 30s, the target is 55 inspectors. He emphasized that the FAA can no longer afford to simply be "reactive."

PASS appreciates that the agency recognizes the need for greater oversight at Boeing. This is something the union has been emphasizing for years, even before the two fatal crashes of the 737 Max in 2018 and 2019. However, we question how the FAA determined the number of inspectors necessary at Boeing and Spirit; its plans to maintain that number; and where they are finding the inspectors who have the required experience in manufacturing. Simply moving inspectors from other manufacturing environments is not a solution. Taking inspectors from other certificates will leave those manufacturers without oversight. The FAA should consult with stakeholders to ensure the safety of the system. As always, PASS stands ready to provide input and assistance as our AVS workforce knows best what resources are needed to ensure the safety of the American flying public.

### **STAFFING CHALLENGES AT THE FAA**

While each of PASS's bargaining units has its specific challenges in ensuring proper recruitment, retention and engagement, there are overarching hurdles that face the agency when considering the staffing of technicians and aviation safety inspectors.

#### ***Recruitment***

The FAA must do a better job of recruiting new talent to join the workforce.

For example, the FAA often struggles to offer salaries that are competitive with the private sector, which can deter highly skilled professionals. While federal employees received a 5.2% pay increase in 2024, the size of this increase was a rare occurrence and did not assist in closing the pay gap between the federal and private sectors. According to the Federal Salary Council, over the last year, federal employees earned on average 27.54% less in wages than their private sector counterparts. This is the second consecutive year that the federal pay gap has widened. It is anticipated that federal employees will receive a 2% increase for 2025.

To maintain the current workforce and attract new employees to public service, the agency should consider starting salaries that are more competitive with the private sector and other incentives to recruit a new generation of highly skilled and dedicated workers. Recruiting and retaining properly skilled FAA employees can only offer the flying public further reassurances that the aviation system is safe and that ensuring that safety is the agency's top priority.

In addition, the hiring and training process for FAA employees can be long and tedious. While PASS emphasizes that there is a certain amount of time that goes into fully training employees represented by the union to serve in such safety-critical positions, the process for doing so can be streamlined to avoid bottlenecks in training. This could also be resolved by managing workloads for employees that permit them to specialize in particular fields rather than be considered “jacks of all trades.”

There is also a lack of effective outreach and marketing to attract diverse talent pools, including women, minorities and young professionals. In fact, according to new data from the Partnership for Public Service, most young people think a career in government is a way to have a positive impact but relatively few have considered such a career.<sup>9</sup>

PASS urges the agency to consider additional ways to recruit new talent, including modernizing the human resources system at the FAA. Within Technical Operations, an internship program has shown signs of success, but it is in its early stages of development. Security clearances for sensitive positions delay the process, as does onboarding additions to the workforce. Also, there is no current assessment test for technicians in the hiring process to determine what skill they are best suited for in Technical Operations before being hired. Finally, frequent changes in FAA leadership positions strain the ability to create a stable environment.

### ***Retention***

Retention of current employees and new hires goes hand in hand with recruitment. The FAA must provide a clear career progression path for its employees with opportunities for professional growth. Because staffing is critically low in many locations, employees are often not allowed to volunteer for “solicitations of interest” (SOIs) that permit them to temporarily gain experience in another job role that can only benefit the agency.

While recruitment figures for the federal government may be low, the retention trends are even more concerning. Federal employees are looking for new careers in droves following return-to-office plans put forth starting in 2021, post-pandemic. Offering flexible working conditions and ensuring a healthy work-life balance can help retain employees.

Congress should consider the unintended consequences when regulating workplace flexibilities. In our view, agencies should continue to develop telework and other workplace flexibilities, subject to the collective bargaining process, that make sense for their workforces and allow them to be competitive with the private sector. Several years before the COVID-19 pandemic, Flight Standards had already moved away from geography in order to be more nimble in regulating the aviation industry. This was an intentional business strategy by FAA to make the workforce more flexible in aviation oversight. This strategy also allows the agency to rely upon a broader pool of employees to work together across the country in situations where they normally would be isolated. This type of organizational design may assist in reducing bottlenecks on recruitment and retention. It also allows the agency to reorganize more efficiently to better regulate the ever-

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<sup>9</sup> Partnership for Public Service, *Making the Federal Government an Employer of Choice for Early Career Professionals*. Accessed July 5, 2024: <https://ourpublicservice.org/publications/making-the-federal-government-an-employer-of-choice-for-early-career-professionals/>.



changing aviation industry. To this end, telework and remote work flexibilities are important options to help retain employees.

In addition, current legislation targeting federal employees, including limiting or monitoring official time and implementing legislation that would strip federal employees of certain rights, does not paint the federal government in a positive light. If the federal government does not recognize the rights and professionalism of its workforce, it will not be able to retain capable employees.

Ensuring engagement of employees is also essential to retaining the workforce. Implementing programs that recognize and reward outstanding performance can boost morale and engagement.

### **ELIMINATING BOTTLENECKS: FAA REAUTHORIZATION PRIORITIES**

PASS thanks this subcommittee for their work to pass legislation reauthorizing the FAA for the next five years. Important language in the legislation, that PASS supported, will go a long way toward protecting our workforce now and in the future.

PASS provided support and background on many important elements of the bill including language directing the FAA to review and revise the aviation safety inspector staffing model; instructing the IG to review FAA workforce plans from the past five fiscal years, raising the safety standard of foreign repair stations to better align with U.S. standards, and, for the first time, the legislation included pivotal language on telework.

Strong policy language on telework in the legislation reinforces concepts proposed by PASS during current contract negotiations for its collective bargaining agreements. The new law states that any telework arrangement should not “adversely impact the mission of the FAA” and “not reduce the safety or efficiency of the national airspace.” It also indicates that any arrangement will optimize the work status of employees teleworking and ensure timely completion of duties to meet the needs of stakeholders.

While the law does not supersede the FAA’s requirement to bargain with its unions over working conditions, it does require the agency to consult with its unions when devising any policy. This has not been the case historically. PASS believes Congress must ensure that the FAA follow through with its directives in the reauthorization legislation to develop workforce plans and staffing models. Securing the strongest FAA workforce—and retaining that workforce—is essential to a safe and efficient aviation system.

### **CONCLUSION**

The work of the highly trained and skilled employees represented by PASS is essential to protecting aviation safety and fulfilling the agency’s mission. PASS recognizes that having the appropriate and skilled workforce in place is essential to maintaining the safety of the system. We want to work with the agency to recruit and retain the very best employees.

PASS respectfully calls on this committee to consider our areas of concern and recognize the critical contributions made by the employees we represent. PASS is ready to work with you to ensure that the United States air traffic control system remains the safest aviation system in the world.