

Congressional Testimony of
Don Chapman, Certified Professional Controller
Federal Aviation Administration
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Subcommittee on Aviation
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My name is Don Chapman. I have been a certified controller for over 18 years. I have been a controller at the Philadelphia Tower and RADAR Approach Control for 15 years. I have served as a Union representative for approximately 11 years. I am a qualified OJTI instructor and qualified as a Controller in Charge.

Understaffing is a serious issue that has affected the entire air traffic system. Some facilities such as Miami Center and Southern California TRACON are what I consider outright dangerous in terms of their low staffing. Others are facing different issues, also as a result of the controller staffing crisis.

Philadelphia Tower and TRACON is one of 138 combined facilities within the FAA inventory. Controllers certify in both the control tower and RADAR operations gaining a complete working knowledge of air traffic operations. Combined facilities like Philadelphia enjoy the lowest operational cost and lowest operational error rates of facilities of its size.

Prior to September 2006, the FAA authorized 109 controllers at Philadelphia. In March of 2007 the FAA implemented a staffing range, with a minimum number of 71 controllers – approximately a 35% reduction in authorized staffing.

Philadelphia Tower and TRACON currently has 69 Certified Professional Controllers (CPCs) and 18 trainees. 11 CPCs are currently eligible to retire and an additional 15 are eligible to retire by the end of the year.

In an FAA staff study dated June 8, 2007, the FAA noted that, “Philadelphia Tower/TRACON is faced with the possibility of a severe staffing shortage of Certified Professional Controllers due to the number of controller retirements.” The study went on to say, “The loss of qualified controllers, supervisors and support staff is creating a strain on the required operational staffing and the training of developmental controllers assigned to the facility”.

Traditionally, high-density terminal facilities such as Philadelphia have always recruited experienced controllers from lower-density facilities to fill vacancies. Due to the staffing shortage, the FAA has begun introducing newly hired controllers with no experience into these top tier facilities, creating an extreme burden on facility training as well as a drastic reduction in experience level.

At Philadelphia, for example, a typical crew of 7 controllers manning the tower cab had an average combined total of at least 40-50 years experience. Currently, on any given day the tower cab may be staffed with controllers with only 1-2 years of total experience.

In an attempt to cope with this crisis, the FAA announced its intent to split Philadelphia Tower and TRACON into two separate facilities in January 2009. This action will allow the FAA to misleadingly report that they have more certified controllers, when they will have only changed the structure of the facilities – a disingenuous claim at best.

Additionally, this separation will remove the optimal seamless environment and efficiencies that have existed for approximately 40 years and provides the FAA an excuse to further cut the salary levels of new controllers. Such actions will result in a further reduction in incentives for new controllers to come to a facility like Philadelphia, and a degradation of the quality of controllers that the facility recruits.

The FAA has compounded staffing problems rather than easing them. Instead of allowing the controller ranks to become healthier, the FAA has continually reduced the active staffing levels in favor of moving controllers to supervisory or other non-controlling positions.

While controllers staffing levels have remained inadequate, supervisory positions have actually been increased. In the past 4 years, as the staffing shortage loomed, 16 certified controllers were transferred to non-controlling positions.

- In 2004, Philadelphia had 9 supervisors, 4 second- or third-level managers, and approximately 89 controllers—and we worked 475,000 operations.
- In 2007, Philadelphia had 6 second-level managers, 12 supervisors, and as few as 82 controllers - and we worked 516,000 operations.

Additionally, the FAA has made questionable management decisions regarding staffing. Earlier this year, a certified veteran controller, who was also a qualified instructor, was given an incentive bonus of \$20,000 to transfer *from* Philadelphia to Chicago. Shortly thereafter, the FAA offered a new incentive bonus of \$20,000 to attract controllers to transfer *to* Philadelphia. In other words, the FAA paid \$20,000 to *attract* a replacement for the controller the Agency had just paid \$20,000 to *leave*.

Other effects of understaffing affect not only the daily operations of air traffic control, but also the overall mission of air traffic control. Certified controllers are frequently the only personnel with an in-depth, up-to-date working knowledge of air traffic operations and our input is essential in developing new important procedures and deploying new equipment. Staffing shortages have created a situation where it is nearly impossible to allow current certified controllers to have meaningful participation in the development of vital procedures and equipment, leading to either the development of unsafe changes or the equipment-deployment delays and cost over-runs.

Due to staffing shortages, controllers are routinely extended to work 10-hour shifts. As a result, the time between shifts that would otherwise be available for rest before the next shift is reduced, resulting in exacerbated fatigue issues that would not otherwise exist or be as acute. Tired controllers work slower, and often when controllers are worn out they tend to slow down in the interest of safety.

Controller training has been detrimentally impacted by the staffing shortage. Training debriefs should take place after each session, but instead trainees are routinely rushed through because instructors simply don't have adequate time as they are needed to staff other positions. This has severely reduced the quality of instruction the next-generation controller is receiving.

The act of providing training requires an instructor to have to try to anticipate what a trainee will say or do. Many times the instructor must slow operations to maintain an adequate safety margin, slowing air traffic operations and adding to delays and reduced safety margins.

The staffing shortage has also caused the FAA to rely on instructors with ever-decreasing levels of experience in order to move new-hires through the training process at a rapid pace. Many times, new instructors have only recently certified themselves and are then asked to train new controllers before they themselves have any substantive level of experience or first-hand knowledge to transfer.