

Written Testimony of  
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United States Senate

**“Flying on Empty: How Shutdowns Threaten Air Safety, Travel, and the Economy”**



Thank you for the opportunity to testify on behalf of the National Air Traffic Controllers Association, AFL-CIO (NATCA) at today's hearing titled "Flying on Empty: How Shutdowns Threaten Air Safety, Travel, and the Economy."

NATCA is the exclusive representative for nearly 20,000 dedicated American workers, including the Federal Aviation Administration's (FAA) air traffic controllers, traffic management coordinators and specialists, flight service station air traffic controllers, staff support specialists, engineers and architects, and other aviation safety professionals, as well as Department of Defense (DOD) and Federal Contract Tower (FCT) air traffic controllers.

NATCA takes great pride in its role as an aviation safety organization that stands shoulder-to-shoulder with government and industry stakeholders to ensure that the National Airspace System (NAS) remains the safest and most efficient in the world. The air traffic controllers and other aviation safety professionals NATCA represents are vital to the U.S. economy, ensuring the safe and efficient movement of passengers and cargo within the National Airspace System (NAS).

The NAS moves approximately 45,000 flights, 3 million passengers, and more than 59,000 tons of cargo every day across more than 29 million square miles of airspace. Although it remains the safest, most efficient, and most complex aviation system in the world, NATCA always strives to bolster safety, mitigate risk, and improve efficiency.

NATCA grieves for the families, friends, and communities that have been devastated by the aviation accident on January 29 at Washington National Airport (DCA), as well as the UPS cargo plane that crashed just after takeoff on November 4 from Louisville Muhammad Ali International Airport (SDF). Although NATCA does not comment on ongoing National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB) investigations, these tragedies highlight the critical and high-consequence nature of air travel. NATCA remains steadfast in our commitment to work with all federal agencies investigating these accidents to ensure we can identify the root causes.

NATCA's testimony today will focus on (1) the negative effects of government shutdowns, (2) the persistent challenges with controller staffing and funding for modernization programs that predate the most recent shutdown, and (3) the legislative solutions that would help eliminate future shutdown risks for the NAS and its frontline workforce.

## **I. Negative Effects of Government Shutdowns**

NATCA shares in this Committee's serious concerns about the risks inherent in a government shutdown and the compounding negative effects a shutdown has on aviation safety and the U.S. economy. Government shutdowns – of any length – are also incredibly stressful and distracting for the nearly 20,000 air traffic controllers and other aviation safety professionals NATCA represents, the vast majority of whom work without pay during a shutdown. This is not acceptable and not sustainable.

Nevertheless, during the recent 43-day shutdown, controllers continued to show up and step up for the American flying public and each other, deftly performing their safety-critical functions at the highest level despite operating 3,800 fully certified controllers short of the Federal Aviation Administration's (FAA) staffing target.

Although NATCA is thankful that Congress reached an agreement last week to end the shutdown, the current continuing resolution (CR) funding the Department of Transportation and other departments and agencies expires on January 31, 2026. This means we could be facing another government shutdown less than three months since controllers and other excepted aviation safety professionals were required to work full time without pay, including mandatory overtime in many cases. It would be incredibly unfair to ask these hard-working, patriotic American air traffic controllers and their families to prepare for or endure another protracted shutdown. We cannot continue to ask air traffic controllers and their families to bear the burden of policy disagreements in Congress.

#### **A. Shutdowns Historically Harm Controller Staffing and Delay the Development, Testing, and Implementation of Critical Modernization and Safety Programs**

Although it is difficult to predict what new challenges may arise during a shutdown, NATCA is extremely grateful to Department of Transportation Secretary Sean Duffy for keeping the FAA's controller hiring and training pipeline open, as well as his commitment to ensuring critical modernization and safety programs were not negatively affected during the shutdown.

In fact, for the first time ever, Secretary Duffy directed the FAA to continue hiring and training controller candidates at the FAA's Academy in Oklahoma City during the shutdown, thereby ensuring controller staffing would not be as negatively affected unlike previous shutdowns. From the beginning, NATCA has also strongly supported Secretary Duffy's plan to supercharge the hiring of controller trainees, bringing in the best and brightest controller candidates.

The controller workforce has been understaffed for more than a decade, resulting in mandatory overtime, including regular 10-hour days and six-day weeks. Last year, controllers at 40% of FAA facilities worked six days a week at least once per month. Several facilities require six-day workweeks every week. In addition, we may not know for months or years the negative effects of shutdowns on recruitment and retention. The FAA and NATCA are acutely aware of these thin staffing margins and the compounding effects they have on controller stress and fatigue.

Similarly, Secretary Duffy directed the FAA to continue supporting modernization, safety, and infrastructure programs through the shutdown. Thanks to his leadership, NATCA subject matter experts continued to participate in testing, development, and deployment activities. This was critical because any disruption would have severely hindered Secretary Duffy's critical initiative to modernize the FAA's physical and technological infrastructure, so that the U.S. continues to be the gold standard for global aviation. NATCA strongly supports this initiative, and controllers play a critical role in the development, testing, training, and implementation of new modernization and safety programs. We also thank Congress for its downpayment to modernize the air traffic control system. We look forward to working with you to secure the remaining funding.

#### **B. This Shutdown Pushed the System and Its Workforce to the Brink**

During the 43-day government shutdown, controllers and other aviation safety professionals received one partial paycheck and then missed two consecutive full paychecks. Asking these dedicated, patriotic American workers to survive working full time for more than a month without pay is simply not sustainable. That situation creates substantial distractions for individuals who are

already engaged in extremely stressful work. The financial and mental strain increase risks within the NAS, making the system less safe with each passing day of a shutdown.

As a result, NATCA advocates were tireless in their pursuit and support of all possible solutions. NATCA consistently said that it would support any measure that would end the shutdown and pay air traffic controllers and other aviation safety professionals, including a clean CR. NATCA also strongly supported other bills that would have paid air traffic controllers during the shutdown.

Another alternative that NATCA continues to strongly support is Chairman Moran's bill, S. 1045, the Aviation Funding Stability Act of 2025, which would provide continuing appropriations for the FAA out of the Airport and Airways Trust Fund in the event of a shutdown. Over the years, NATCA has supported previous versions of this bill and currently also supports substantially similar bills in the House of Representatives introduced by Rep. Aaron Bean (FL-04), H.R. 5455, and Rep. Steve Cohen (TN-09) and Rep. André Carson (IN-07), H.R. 5451.

With the recent shutdown in the past, but with another funding deadline looming in January, NATCA has turned its attention to supporting, advocating for, and passing Chairman Moran's bill, the Aviation Funding Stability Act of 2025. Shutdowns create real problems for real American workers, but the Chairman's bill solves many of those problems in a practical and sustainable way.

If it were to pass, the Aviation Funding Stability Act of 2025 would ensure that the FAA could operate despite a government-wide shutdown, meaning that controllers would not be forced to make difficult practical and financial choices as a result of not being paid such as how to pay for housing/rent, gas, food, and/or childcare services. Thus, these controllers and other aviation safety professionals would be able to remain completely focused on their safety-critical jobs, instead of worrying about paying the bills.

## **II. Persistent Challenges Remain That Predated Shutdown**

As we mentioned earlier, controller staffing and modernization funding challenges were two critical issues that predated the 43-day government shutdown. That is why NATCA continues to strongly support Secretary Duffy's initiatives to supercharge controller hiring and training and modernize the FAA's physical and technological infrastructure to support the NAS of the future.

### **A. Controller Staffing Remains Near a 30-Year Low and Had a Disproportionate Effect on System Capacity During the Shutdown**

The controller workforce has been understaffed for more than a decade, resulting in mandatory overtime, including regular 10-hour days and six-day weeks. Last year, controllers at 40% of FAA facilities worked six days a week at least once per month. Several facilities require six-day workweeks every week. The FAA and NATCA are acutely aware of these thin staffing margins and the compounding effects they have on controller stress and fatigue.

NATCA remains focused on improving the system-wide controller staffing shortage. A properly-staffed controller workforce is necessary in order to safely and efficiently meet all of its operational, statutory, and contractual requirements, while also having the personnel resources to research, develop, deploy, and then train the existing workforce on new procedures, technology, and modernization initiatives. Without a sustainable hiring, training, and staffing model like the one

outlined in the FAA Reauthorization Act of 2024, which passed both chambers with overwhelming bipartisan support, the FAA will struggle to maintain the current capacity of the system, let alone modernize or expand it for new users. This Committee should continue to oversee the FAA's efforts to implement the staffing provisions contained in the Reauthorization Act, including maximum hiring and deployment of Tower Simulator Systems, which have proven to reduce training times by 27%.

### **B. FAA Safety and Technology Modernization Programs Need Additional Resources**

Controller staffing and infrastructure progress are inextricably linked. A properly-staffed workforce of fully certified controllers is needed for the FAA to successfully develop, test, deploy, and train the workforce on new technology and modernization programs on time and under budget. Without proper controller staffing, investments in infrastructure and modernization programs will not yield their full potential.

It is critical that NATCA remain a productive and collaborative partner throughout development, testing, training, and implementation across a wide range of safety, technology, and modernization programs. NATCA's continued involvement will ensure that the FAA delivers these initiatives to industry stakeholders and the flying public on-time and at a cost-savings to the American taxpayers. When NATCA representatives are not involved throughout the entirety of a process, modernization programs are delayed and experience cost overruns, because of extensive, costly, and time-consuming revisions following development, testing, and after implementation.

The FAA also must continue to be transparent with its need for increased Facilities and Equipment (F&E) funding so that it can meet its own equipment sustainment, replacement, and modernization needs. If not, it will continue to exacerbate the FAA's significant sustainment and replacement backlog. Failing to maintain and replace critical safety equipment that has exceeded its expected life introduces unnecessary risk into the system. These funding limitations also have prevented the FAA from designing and implementing new technologies that will improve safety. We are encouraged that FAA has increased its F&E request for fiscal year 2026 and the Senate Appropriations Committee has increased its allocation for F&E.

### **C. FAA's Physical Infrastructure is Rapidly Aging and Many Facilities Have Exceeded Their Expected Lifecycles**

The FAA operates more than 300 air traffic control facilities of varying ages and conditions. The FAA's 21 Air Route Traffic Control Centers (ARTCCs) located in the continental United States were built in the 1960s and are more than 60 years old. The FAA's Terminal Radar Approach Control facilities (TRACONs) are, on average, more than 25 years old. In addition, the FAA has 132 combined TRACON/towers, which are, on average, approximately 35 years old. Finally, the FAA has an additional 131 stand-alone Towers which average more than 30 years old.

Many FAA facilities have exceeded their expected lifecycles. Others have major systems that have exceeded their expected functional lifecycle such as roofs, windows, HVAC systems, plumbing, and elevators, which no longer perform their necessary functions. Some of these issues have led to periodic airspace shutdowns and many others have led to safety concerns for the workforce. When

these major systems fail, or facilities have integrity problems, it can lead to increasing delays, which negatively affect the flying public and the economy.

The FAA is addressing its aging infrastructure through a combination of (1) realignments and consolidations, (2) repairing, sustaining, and maintaining some facilities, and (3) replacing a handful of others. However, that process has been slow and hampered by funding limitations. The FAA will need a substantially increased investment in its F&E budget or a supplemental funding source to adequately maintain, let alone, replace its aging physical infrastructure.

Although NATCA recognizes that the FAA's future facility footprint is likely to be different than the current footprint, realigning and consolidating facilities for the sake of consolidation – or based on real estate considerations that are unrelated to the agency's core mission – is not in the best interest of the NAS or the flying public. As the FAA considers options for ATC facility realignment and consolidation, several key factors should be considered such as safety, continuity, capacity and efficiency, cost savings, and the effects on the workforce. NATCA stands ready to partner with Congress, the Administration, and the FAA to address these critical issues.

### **III. Legislative Solutions to Future Shutdown Risks**

During the shutdown, NATCA consistently said that it would support any measure that would end the shutdown and pay air traffic controllers, including a clean CR. But NATCA also strongly supported numerous other bills that would have paid controllers during the shutdown. However, now is the time to pass long-term, meaningful legislation so that controllers and other aviation safety professionals don't ever have to experience that level of stress and financial instability again.

#### **A. NATCA strongly supports S. 1045, Chairman Moran's Aviation Funding Stability Act of 2025, which would ensure the FAA has stable and predictable funding in the face of future shutdown threats.**

Chairman Moran's bill, S. 1045, the Aviation Funding Stability Act of 2025, would provide continuing appropriations for the FAA out of the Airport and Airways Trust Fund in the event of a shutdown. NATCA also supports substantially similar bills in the House of Representatives. With another funding deadline looming in January, Chairman Moran's bill has become one of NATCA's top priorities.

During the shutdown, NATCA also supported several other Senate bills that would have appropriated funds to pay federal employees, including NATCA air traffic controllers: S. 3012 – The Shutdown Fairness Act introduced by Sen. Ron Johnson (WI); S. 3039 – The True Shutdown Fairness Act introduced by Sen. Chris Van Hollen (MD); S. 3031 – The Keep America Flying Act introduced by Sen. Ted Cruz (TX); and S. 3043 – The Military and Federal Employee Protection Act introduced by Sen. Gary Peters (MI).

NATCA strongly supported each of these bills because they would have alleviated the financial hardships created by the shutdown by paying certain groups of federal employees, such as air traffic controllers and members of the military.

## **B. Other Aviation Safety Legislation**

NATCA strongly supports other legislation that would improve aviation safety.

One of those bills is the bipartisan agreement between Chairman Cruz and Ranking Member Cantwell on S. 2503 – the Rotorcraft Operations Transparency and Oversight Reform (ROTOR Act), which would improve aircraft safety in and around airports.

Additionally, NATCA supports S. 1985 – the Safe Operations of Shared Airspace Act of 2025, which would improve aviation safety, enhance safety reporting systems, improve controller training, and extend FAA’s max hiring requirements contained in the FAA Reauthorization Act of 2024 for an additional five years, because it will take a long-term commitment to fully staff the air traffic controller workforce.

Finally, NATCA supports both bills that Ranking Member Duckworth and Senator Hoeven are soon to introduce regarding controller and pilot mental health. Both the Mental Health in Aviation Act and the Aviation Medication Transparency Act will improve safety by bringing mental health to the forefront improving access to care and medication.

## **IV. Conclusion**

NATCA will continue to leave shutdown politics unrelated to aviation safety to the elected representatives in Congress. Controllers did not start the shutdown and were not responsible for ending the shutdown.

Congress now must engage in bipartisan negotiations on other pressing issues facing our nation so that we are not back in the same position nine weeks from now. Congress also must prioritize passing Chairman Moran’s bill so this never happens to controllers and aviation safety professionals again.

NATCA looks forward to working with members of this Committee, the Administration, appropriators, all other Members of Congress, and aviation stakeholders to achieve these and many other shared goals.

Thank you for holding this important hearing and providing the opportunity to testify.