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Testimony

**“FLYING ON EMPTY: HOW SHUTDOWNS THREATEN AIR SAFETY, TRAVEL, AND THE ECONOMY”
STATEMENT OF GOVERNOR CHRISTOPHER T. SUNUNU, PRESIDENT AND CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER
(CEO), AIRLINES FOR AMERICA
BEFORE THE
U.S. SENATE COMMITTEE ON COMMERCE, SCIENCE, AND TRANSPORTATION, SUBCOMMITTEE ON AVIATION,
SPACE, AND INNOVATION**

November 19, 2025

Good afternoon, Chairman Moran, Ranking Member Duckworth and members of the Subcommittee. My name is Chris Sununu, and I am the President and CEO of Airlines for America (A4A). Thank you for inviting me here today, and on behalf of all our A4A members¹, I appreciate the opportunity to participate in the Subcommittee's expeditious examination of legislative solutions to end the practice of using the traveling and shipping public as pawns during federal government shutdowns.

The old adage "the definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results" can surely be applied to the circumstances of the last couple months and the specter of yet another potential shutdown at the end of January 2026.

Urgent Legislative Actions Needed: In the short term, I believe two actions are clearly necessary:

1. Congress must pass the Fiscal Year (FY) 2026 Transportation, Housing and Urban Development, and Related Agencies (THUD) and Department of Homeland Security (DHS) appropriations bills to make sure the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA), Transportation Security Administration (TSA) and Customs and Border Protection (CBP) are not subject to shutdown impacts for the rest of FY2026; and
2. Congress must identify and enact solutions that will ensure the FAA, TSA and CBP are insulated from the impacts of any future lapses in appropriations, ensuring their employees can continue their work uninterrupted and with pay.

Chairman Moran, I would like to specifically thank you for your leadership in trying to find legislative solutions that would alleviate many of the impacts felt by the aviation community and the traveling and shipping public. The bill you introduced in March (S. 1045), which would address the lapse in appropriations for the FAA, is a tremendous starting point, and I am hopeful we can carry these types of provisions over to the TSA and CBP who also play a critical role in supporting the daily operations of the aviation sector.

I am in no manner downplaying the criticality of other government agencies or employees impacted by the shutdown; however, the unique nature and funding structure of our aviation system should allow for efficient and effective budgetary contingency plans that would allow FAA, TSA and CBP to operate normally during shutdowns caused by a lack of funding.

Shutdown Impacts are Disastrous: More than most, this Subcommittee knows that shutdowns are not new and they are becoming more frequent. In just the last 15 years alone, the FAA has been subjected to several partial or government-wide budget reductions and shutdowns.

- In July 2011, the lapse in FAA's authorization caused the FAA to stop work on numerous projects including air traffic control modernization projects;

¹ A4A is the trade association for the leading U.S. airlines, both passenger and cargo carriers. Members of the association are Alaska Airlines; American Airlines; Atlas Air; Delta Air Lines; FedEx; JetBlue Airways; Southwest Airlines; United Airlines; and UPS. Air Canada is an associate member.



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- In April 2013, the government-wide sequester caused the FAA to furlough air traffic controllers resulting in massive delays throughout the air traffic control (ATC) system and the cancellation of hundreds of flights, impacting hundreds of thousands of passengers;
- In October 2013, the government shutdown resulted in many FAA employee furloughs; and
- In December 2019, the partial government shutdown resulted in many FAA employee furloughs.

Today, we find ourselves recovering from another government shutdown—this one 43 days long, the longest in history, with the looming threat of another in January.

Too much is at stake to continue with the status quo. Commercial aviation drives 5 percent of U.S. GDP and helps to support more than 10 million U.S. jobs. We operate the safest mode of transportation, with U.S. airlines alone operating 27,000 flights carrying 2.7 million passengers and 61,000 tons of cargo **every day** across the globe.

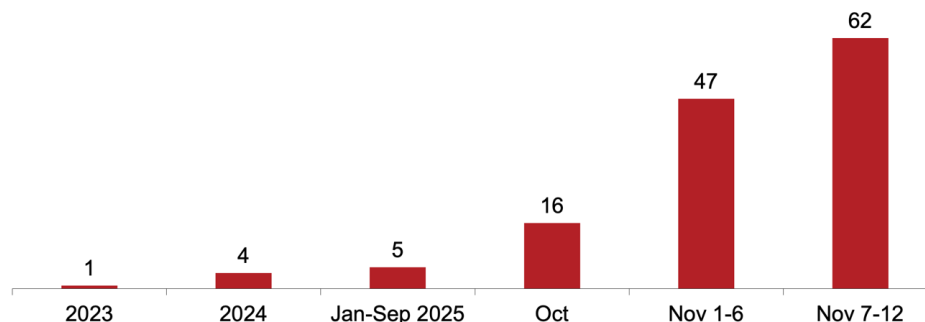
Shutdowns drive both human and economic consequences and can impact safety throughout the national airspace. Airlines effectively mitigated the brunt of the impacts of the shutdown through October and early November. After 5 weeks of managing an already strained system, fatigue and economic pressures on controllers drove increased staffing triggers resulting in the FAA implementing a flight reduction program for 40 airports around the country. The FAA cited an increase in pilot reports that highlighted the growing weariness among air traffic controllers as well as a couple of near-miss ground events that raised concerns among the regulators. Administration officials linked this safety risk to the financial strain of working without pay for such an extended period. We cannot ignore the long-standing underlying issue, which is that our system has been experiencing an air traffic controller shortage for many years. A4A's top priority during the most recent FAA Reauthorization cycle was to address the controller shortage as well as our country's antiquated air traffic control technology. Unfortunately, this shutdown moved ATC staffing and modernization efforts two steps backwards.

The data from this most recent shutdown shows the material impact and real-world consequences of extended shutdowns and will hopefully convince policymakers that we should never subject our air traffic control system to this chaos again.

Controller Staffing Triggers and Operational Limitations. According to FAA data, controller staffing issues contributed to 5 percent of National Airspace System (NAS) delay minutes from January through September, jumping to 16 percent in October and 62 percent in November. Over 6 million A4A member airline passengers were affected during the shutdown.

Staffing Issues Are Increasingly Contributing to National Airspace System (NAS) Delays

Percentage of NAS Delay Minutes in Which Staffing Is a Factor



Source: FAA OPSNET detailed delay reports based on indication of secondary cause



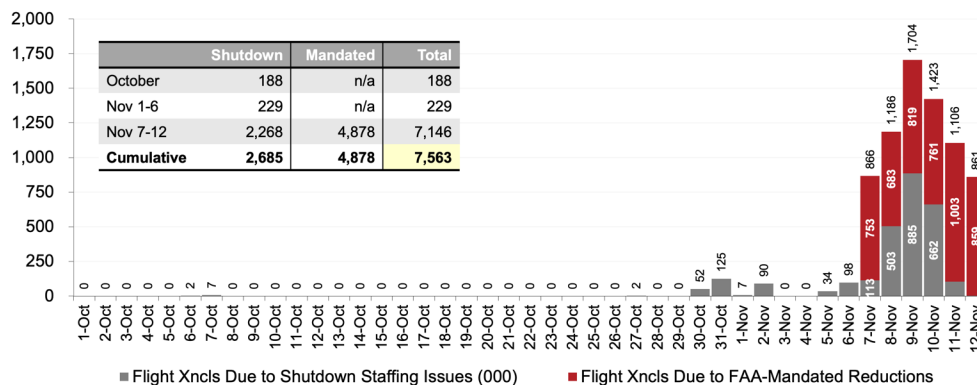
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Many of the disruptions faced by passengers between October 1 and early November were a function of controller staffing-driven flight delays. During that period, A4A airlines incurred over 30,000 staffing-related delays but were able to minimize cancellations to about 400 (<0.1%). This shutdown disrupted 3.7 million passengers in that time period and pushed the airlines to scramble to minimize customer impacts. The air traffic controller staffing issues then led to an unprecedented shutdown consequence where the FAA issued an Emergency Order (Order #1) directing air carriers to reduce domestic schedule operations across the NAS at 40 airports. Specifically, Order #1 directed a 4 percent reduction in operations on Friday, November 7, ramping up to 6 percent by November 11, 8 percent by November 13 and 10 percent by November 14. On November 12, citing substantial and rapid improvement in facility staffing conditions, the FAA issued a new Emergency Order (Order #2), which superseded Order #1. Order #2 modified the operational limitation escalation to 6 percent. From November 7—the first day of the FAA-mandated flight-schedule reductions—through November 12, A4A airlines incurred more than 15,600 staffing-related delays and more than 7,100 staffing-related flight cancellations, disrupting 2.3 million passengers.

A4A Member Airlines: Flight Cancellations Attributable to Controller Staffing Issues October 1-November 12, 2025



Source: A4A summary of data provided by Alaska Airlines, American Airlines, Delta Air Lines, JetBlue Airways, Southwest Airlines and United Airlines



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airlines.org

The operational reduction percentages may seem trivial to the average observer, but when put into context they are extreme. On November 12, for example, 99.8 percent of the 861 staffing-related cancellations were attributable to FAA-mandated flight reductions at 40 airports. For perspective, **in November 2024**, data from the Bureau of Transportation Statistics show that **U.S. airlines canceled just 0.46 percent of scheduled flights—and that's across all categories of causation, including NAS issues**. Promulgating a cancellation rate of 6 percent **for several consecutive days**, if not longer, for ATC staffing reasons alone, without a chance for operations to recover, is highly disruptive to our customers and takes a toll on our frontline employees—at the airport, on the plane, on our help desks, etc. At the 40 target airports, applying the 6 percent directive translates to approximately 875 cancellations and 60,000 disrupted passengers **per day which is more than 13 times the normal rate**.

A4A estimates that if Order #1 would have reached the original 10 percent threshold, by November 14, the daily average toll on the U.S. economy would have reached as much as \$580 million depending on the degree to which airlines could reaccommodate cancellation-disrupted passengers on the remaining flights.

Of note, that economic impact estimate is tied solely to compliance with the flight-reduction directive, and it does not include the costs associated with the value of passenger time, reduced bookings, passenger refunds, etc. It does include



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indirect and induced impacts tied to reduced visitor spending, state and local tax revenue and spending across the broader economy as individuals within and outside the aviation supply chain curtailed expenditures.

The air traffic controller staffing crisis also triggered broad secondary impacts. In many instances, even those passengers who successfully reach their destination encountered long departure delays, extended tarmac times and highly unpredictable arrival times. For the airlines, many flight crews were timing out (per regulated limits) or missing connections because of late aircraft arrivals and equipment mis-positioning.

For the controller staffing issues in particular, unlike weather-driven disruptions, each controller shift change or facility staffing trigger could result in added hours of delay with no advance notice, undermining the airlines' ability to plan, staff or accommodate impacted customers. Despite airline mitigations, it created mass disruptions and should serve as an example of the real-world economic and human impact of a government shutdown. This simply should never happen again, and it is most certainly preventable.

Transportation Security Impacts. Adequately staffing and supporting the DHS and its component agencies, TSA and CBP, is also extremely important to the smooth operation of the aviation sector and is vital to our industry. In 2025 to date, U.S. airlines have experienced travel volumes comparable to last year's all-time high. Several of the busiest days in TSA history have occurred in 2025, including a record-setting 3.1 million passengers and crewmembers screened on June 22.

Fortunately, from a TSA perspective, most hot spot locations during the shutdown were appropriately mitigated by TSA deploying personnel from its National Deployment Force to help support airports with higher travel volumes. However, as the shutdown progressed, some airports were starting to experience negative operational impacts of higher Transportation Security Officer (TSO) call-out rates.

The shutdown also had larger security impacts via the temporary expiration of several critical security authorities that the Committee and Congress should consider granting permanent authority in order to avoid future lapses. Specifically:

- TSA's Reimbursable Screening Services Program (RSSP): The RSSP program is a vital component to distributed passenger screening for the upcoming 2026 FIFA World Cup events and TSA should be granted permanent authority.
- Authority for the Unified National-Level Response to Persistent Unmanned Aircraft Systems (UAS) Disruption of Operations at Core 30 Airports expired on Sept. 30, 2025. TSA is the Lead Federal Agency responsible for overseeing any Counter-UAS (C-UAS) response to persistent and disruptive UAS activities at our nation's airports. Disruptive UAS in restricted airspace around our nation's airports remains a persistent and evolving threat with thousands of sightings reported annually. Congress should extend and expand C-UAS authorities immediately to ensure the NAS is protected from errant, disruptive and nefarious UAS.
- The expiration of the 2015 Cybersecurity Information Sharing Act (CISA'15) led many industries to reevaluate the risk of voluntarily sharing cybersecurity information with the federal government. CISA'15 established a legal framework that is intended to facilitate the voluntary sharing of cyber threat indicators and defensive measures between and within the federal government and non-federal entities, including private sector organizations and state, local, tribal and territorial, including airlines.

From a passenger travel experience perspective, the Administration was fortunately able to utilize reconciliation funds included in the One Big Beautiful Bill Act to fund and pay CBP officers and TSA air marshals during the shutdown. However, that only covered law enforcement officers and is likely a one-time solution, not a long-term remedy to address future shutdowns.



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Finally, we are also concerned that the shutdown negatively impacted operational readiness for upcoming global events like the 2026 FIFA World Cup and America 250. Much work will need to be done to prepare for the safe and secure execution of these events and unnecessary government shutdowns are detrimental to the public-private collaboration necessary to ensure transit to and from these events is safe and secure.

Solutions – ATC Staffing, Brand New Air Traffic Control System, Never Subject Aviation to Shutdown Again

Address the Air Traffic Controller Shortage. One of the biggest detriments to growth in the airline industry has been the ongoing air traffic controller staffing shortage, which was an acute issue prior to the shutdown and will only be exacerbated by the long-term impacts of the most recent shutdown. Beginning in October 2023, airlines reduced their flying from the New York metropolitan area by 10 percent to accommodate the lack of controller staffing at critical facilities.

In November 2024, the Department of Transportation Inspector General (DOT IG) put out its DOT Top Management Challenges report. That report states:

- “...FAA has not ensured adequate controller staffing at its most critical facilities. For example, we (IG) found that 20 of 26 critical facilities were staffed below the Agency’s threshold of 85 percent.”
- “FAA’s implementation of pauses in air traffic controller training during the COVID-19 pandemic contributed to controller staffing challenges by resulting in an increase in certification times for controllers. FAA needs improved resiliency in staffing and contingency planning for disruptions, and our audit work shows that FAA’s lack of a plan to address these staffing challenges limits the capacity of the NAS.”

Build the Brand New Air Traffic Control System. The U.S. ATC system is very safe, but the lack of government action has made it inefficient, antiquated and far from the “gold standard” Americans deserve. Unnecessary travel delays cost the U.S. economy and passengers more than \$30 billion annually. These delays are the direct result of systemwide ATC inefficiencies resulting from the use of outdated, World War II-era radar technology. Controllers are still using paper strips to control traffic instead of electronic strips. Some computer system updates are done with floppy disks. It should not be a surprise that flights between Washington, D.C., and New York used to take 55 minutes, but to account for air traffic delays and inefficiencies, these flights are now scheduled to take 80 minutes or longer. Despite being a vital part of U.S. economic infrastructure, our airspace and the technology that supports it is the modern equivalent of driving a horse and buggy on a gravel road. This lack of efficiency and the resulting reduced capacity directly and negatively impacts carriers’ ability to grow and compete and robs consumers and the economy of growth, jobs and related benefits.

A4A is not alone with these recommendations, as we are part of an unprecedented, industry-wide broad aviation community coalition established earlier this year, the “Modern Skies Coalition”. The coalition wholeheartedly endorses Secretary of Transportation Duffy’s plans to “supercharge” air traffic controller hiring at the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) and modernize the air traffic control system. The Coalition strongly supported Congress’s \$12.5 billion downpayment toward air traffic control modernization and we continue to advocate in support of Secretary Duffy’s acknowledgment that additional funding of at least \$19 billion will be needed to completely build a new air traffic control system.

The most recent shutdown distinctly showed the lengths at which the FAA and the aviation community will go to maintain safety in the system, but it also plainly displayed the system’s growing inefficiencies fragility. Congress has a responsibility to establish a governance and funding system that will provide stable and predictable funding to not only avoid future shutdown scenarios but also holistically address the controller shortage and the efficiency of the ATC system.



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Ensure the FAA Is Not Harmed by Another Government Shutdown

This shutdown has demonstrated the serious safety, human and economic consequences of subjecting the aviation sector to this kind of stress and chaos. It must never happen again.

To that end, we strongly support Senator Moran's bill, S. 1045, that ensures that FAA continues to operate during a government shutdown by drawing on monies from the Airport and Airway Trust Fund (AATF). We know that aviation is an ecosystem and would additionally support the ability to pay TSA and CBP from existing user fees. We look forward to continuing to work with authorizers and appropriators on **any legislation that meets our goals of ensuring safety and the operating integrity of the FAA, TSA and CBP. Any bill achieving these goals will have our support.** This shutdown has demonstrated that our system can no longer withstand being collateral damage of Washington policy debates. The Congressional Budget Office's (CBO) January 2025 baseline projections for the AATF show end-of-year uncommitted balances of \$4.8 billion in FY2025 and \$12.4 billion in FY2035.

Our view is that the Administration and Congress should make changes to its administration of the AATF in such a way that continues the appropriators and authorizers important oversight role while giving the FAA the ability to more effectively utilize the AATF balance. This would bring the FAA's Operating and Facilities & Equipment (F&E) capital programs more in line with the approach taken for other transportation programs like the Harbor Maintenance Trust Fund, surface transportation contract authority from the Highway Trust Fund and the Airport Improvement Program.

We stand by to engage and discuss optimal pathways for creating sustainable and predictable funding mechanisms with Congress. Along with a general fund contribution, the FAA is mainly funded from the AATF, which is supported by aviation fuel taxes, ticket taxes and other fees. The FAA must be allowed to fully utilize the existing funds within the AATF to meet current obligations under the recently passed FAA reauthorization law and execute long-term focused investment to modernize the national air space. Developing a predictable source of funding via a multi-year account is necessary to begin recapitalizing major infrastructure assets and ensure the continued safety and efficiency of U.S. airspace.

Conclusion

On behalf of our member airlines, I would be remiss not to acknowledge and sincerely thank the dedicated employees at the DOT, FAA, DHS, TSA, and CBP who dutifully went to work during the shutdown. Despite significant and prolonged hardships, they kept our aviation system operational and safe. We are extremely grateful for their efforts and hopeful that their professionalism does not come into play again on January 30, 2026.

Thank you again for the opportunity to testify. As we approach Thanksgiving—which is expected to see a record 31 million passengers over the holiday—I strongly urge Congress to pass the annual appropriations bills and find long-term solutions to expeditiously enact practical solutions that will eliminate any future air transportation disruptions caused by government shutdowns.