Testimony of

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Chairwoman
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Before the

Committee on Commerce, Science, &
Transportation Subcommittee on Aviation

US Senate

– On –

NTSB Preliminary Report: The DCA Midair Collision
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Good morning, Chairman Moran, Ranking Member Duckworth, and members of the subcommittee. My name is Jennifer Homendy, and I am honored to serve as Chairman of the National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB).[1] Thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today to provide an update regarding the NTSB's investigation the midair collision involving a US Army Sikorsky UH-60L (under the callsign PAT25) and PSA Airlines dba American Airlines flight 5342, a Mitsubishi Heavy Industries (MHI) RJ Aviation (formerly Bombardier) CL-600-2C10 (CRJ700) that occurred over the Potomac River in southwest Washington, DC, about 2048 eastern standard time (EST) on January 29, 2025.

The 2 pilots, 2 flight attendants, and 60 passengers aboard the airplane and all 3 crewmembers aboard the helicopter were fatally injured. Both aircraft were destroyed as a result of the accident. Flight 5342 was operating under the provisions of Title 14 Code of Federal Regulations (CFR) Part 121 as a scheduled domestic passenger flight from Wichita Dwight D. Eisenhower National Airport (ICT), Wichita, Kansas, to DCA, departing ICT at 1839 EST. PAT25 originated from Davison Army Airfield (DAA), Fort Belvoir, Virginia, at 1845 EST on a visual flight rules (VFR) flight plan for the pilot's annual standardization evaluation with the use of night vision goggles. Night visual meteorological conditions prevailed in the area of DCA at the time of the accident.

Attached to this testimony are the following: Investigation Preliminary Report and Urgent Recommendation Report.

Before I begin, I want to take a moment and recognize the families and friends of those who lost loved ones in this tragedy. On behalf of the NTSB, I want to express my deepest condolences and our sympathies to each of you. Our mission is to determine what happened and why it happened so no one else experiences the loss you feel today. We keep you in mind every day, as we carry out our solemn mission to prevent future tragedy.

NTSB launched to the accident site that night and investigators remained at DCA

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[1] The NTSB is an independent federal agency charged by Congress with investigating and establishing the facts, circumstances, and cause or probable cause of all civil aviation accidents and serious incidents in the United States and defined accidents in all other modes of transportation, including roadway accidents, grade crossing incidents, railroad accidents, pipeline accidents, major marine casualties occurring on or under the navigable waters, internal waters, or the territorial sea of the United States, and other accidents related to the transportation of individuals or property when the Board decides the accident is catastrophic, the accident involves problems of a recurring character, or the investigation of the accident would carry out our statutory requirements. In addition, the NTSB carries out special studies concerning transportation safety and coordinates the resources of the federal government and other organizations to aid victims and their family members impacted by major transportation disasters.

for approximately four weeks. Work still continues on site, including diving operations to recover personal effects and any remaining portions of the wreckage.

As part of the investigative process, the NTSB invited qualified parties to participate in the investigation. These included Federal Aviation Administration (FAA), the US Army, PSA Airlines, GE Aerospace, Sikorsky, National Air Traffic Controllers Association, Air Line Pilots Association, Association of Flight Attendants, International Association of Machinists and Aerospace Workers, Collins Aerospace, and the Metropolitan Washington Airports Authority.

The parties were formed into specialized investigative groups led by NTSB group chairs in the areas of Air Carrier Operations and Human Performance, Airplane Structures, Airplane Systems, Powerplants, Helicopter Operations and Human Performance, Air Traffic Control and Human Performance, Helicopter Airworthiness, Survival Factors, and Flight Recorders. This week, we formed another investigative group focused on Data Analysis.

There was a whole of government response to this major event, and I want to recognize some of the assistance we received in recovering the victims and wreckage: Metropolitan Washington Airports Authority, D.C. Fire and EMS Department, and other first responders from Virginia and Maryland, the U.S. Coast Guard, the Federal Bureau of Investigations, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, and U.S. Navy Supervisor of Salvage and Diving (SUPSALV).

On March 11, the NTSB released the preliminary report for this investigation, attached in full. It should be emphasized that, as with all preliminary reports, this document contains only factual information pertinent to the investigation. This information is preliminary and subject to change and does not include analysis or a probable cause of the collision, all of which will be issued at a later date as we continue to thoroughly investigate wherever the evidence may lead. There is a lot of work left to be done.

However, as is always the case with our investigations, NTSB does not need to wait until we determine a probable cause to take action if our investigation uncovers facts that demonstrate an intolerable risk to safety. In such cases, we do not hesitate to take urgent action, and in this case that is exactly what we have done.

In conjunction with the release of our preliminary report, we also issued two urgent safety recommendations (also attached) to the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) concerning the helicopter routes near DCA. NTSB urgent recommendations require immediate action to prevent similar accidents or incidents. When we issue them, we believe a critical safety issue must be addressed, with no delay.

In the case of this investigation, while reviewing airport operations and prior incidents, including near mid-air collision events, and while reviewing the existing

helicopter routes for helicopter traffic near DCA, NTSB determined that the existing separation distances between helicopter traffic operating on Route 4 and aircraft landing on runway 33 (the route and runway, respectively, that were in use during the crash) are insufficient, and pose an intolerable risk to aviation safety by increasing the chances of a midair collision at DCA. We've therefore issued an urgent recommendation to the FAA to prohibit operations on Helicopter Route 4 between Hains Point and the Wilson Bridge when runways 15 and 33 are being used for departures and arrivals at DCA.

Recognizing that a total closure of this route when the stated runways are in use would restrict a vital aviation corridor used for law enforcement activity, Coast Guard patrols, and continuity of government operations, and recognizing the potential for increased risk by adding to air traffic controller workload, we also recommended that the FAA designate an alternative helicopter route that can be used to facilitate travel between Hains Point and the Wilson Bridge when that segment of Route 4 is closed.

These recommendations were made because information gathered from voluntary safety reporting programs and the FAA regarding encounters between helicopters and commercial aircraft near DCA showed that, from 2011 through 2024, a vast majority of reported events occurred on approach to landing. Initial analysis found that at least one traffic alert and collision avoidance system, or TCAS, resolution advisory (RA) was triggered per month at DCA due to proximity to a helicopter. The response to TCAS RAs, unlike traffic advisories, or TAs, are recommended escape maneuvers; for example, climb, descend, or level off. While a TA is issued when the intruding aircraft is about 20 seconds from the closest point of approach, or 0.3 nautical miles, whichever occurs first, RA's indicate a collision threat and require immediate action.

In over half of the encounters we reviewed, again from 2011 through 2024, the helicopter may have been above the route altitude restriction. Two-thirds of these events occurred at night.

We then reviewed commercial operations at DCA and found that, between October 2021 and December 2024, there were a total of 944,179 commercial operations at DCA. These are instrument flight rules, or IFR, departures or arrivals. During that time, there were 15,214 occurrences between commercial airplanes and helicopters in which there was a lateral separation distance of less than 1 nautical mile and vertical separation of less than 400 ft. There were 85 recorded events that involved a lateral separation of less than 1500 ft *(or less than 0.3 nautical miles)* and vertical separation of less than 200 ft.

The chart below is a cross-section of the airspace that extends from Runway 33's centerline, spanning from the runway to the east bank of the Potomac River. The figure shows the separation distance that would exist, according to FAA charts, with a helicopter on Route 4 and an airplane descending on the glideslope to runway 33. At the maximum altitude of just 200 ft, a helicopter operating over the eastern shoreline of the Potomac River would have just 75 feet of vertical separation from an airplane approaching runway

33, and that distance decreases if the helicopter is operated farther from the shoreline.

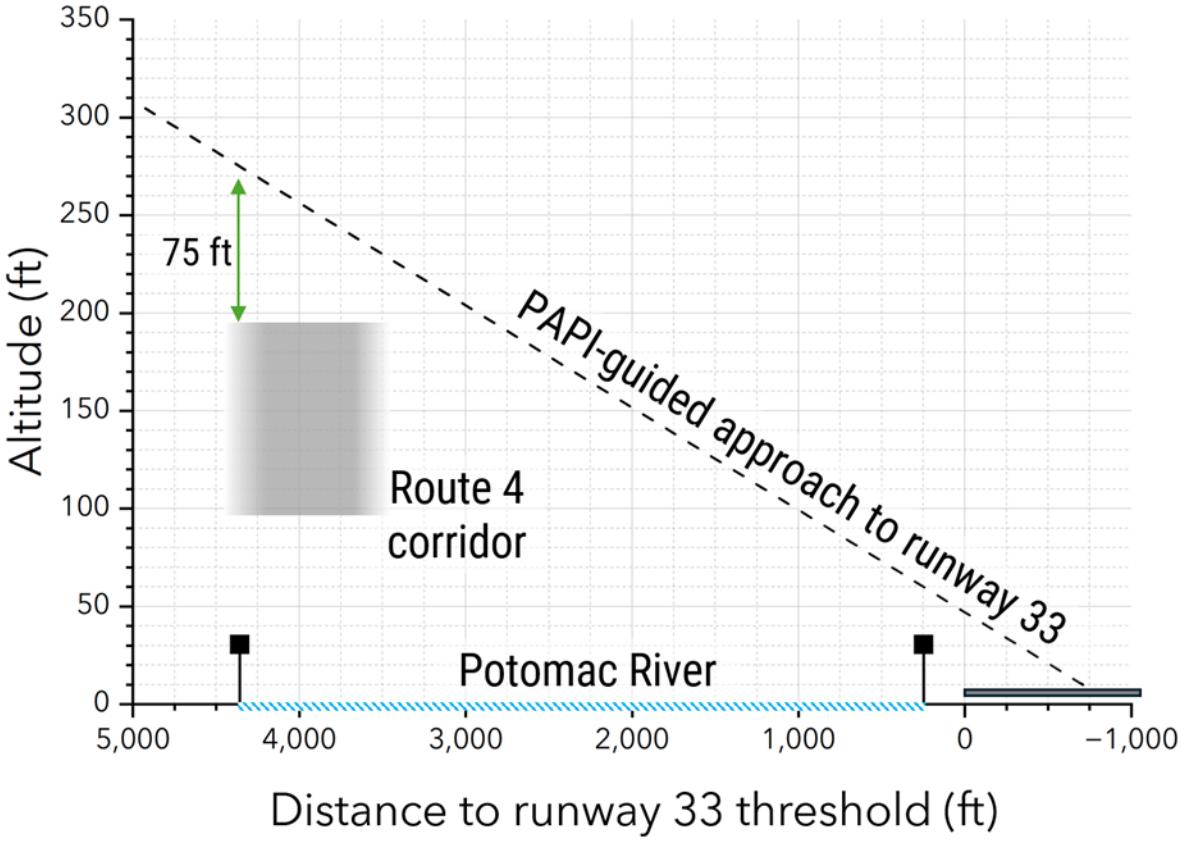

Figure 1. Cross section showing the notional separation between Route 4 and a PAPI-guided visual approach to runway 33, according to FAA charts and aerial photogrammetry analysis.

As a result of the accident, the FAA, under the leadership of U.S. Department of Transportation Secretary Duffy took swift action to ensure safety and restrict helicopter traffic from operating over the Potomac River near DCA until March 31st, and we commend him for that. However, as that deadline nears, NTSB remains concerned about the significant potential for a future midair collision at DCA given the facts we have uncovered. I am pleased to share with you that the Secretary has taken our urgent recommendations very seriously, and I look forward to working with him, Acting Administrator Rocheleau, and Congress to see them implemented as we move forward with this investigation.

Some investigations, understandably, get more public attention than others, but all of our investigations are critical for improving transportation safety. We know that we owe it to the families of those involved, to the communities where events occurred, and to the traveling public to find out what happened, why it happened, and to make recommendations to help ensure it never happens again. Our current investigative workload includes almost 1,250 active investigations in all 50 states and Puerto Rico, in

addition to supporting more than 160 foreign investigations in over 50 countries. Throughout a typical year, we work on about 2,200 domestic and 450 foreign cases, and we expect the number of cases annually to remain high and continue to increase in complexity. Some of our significant ongoing investigations of events that have occurred this year include:

- The in-flight structural failure of a Boeing 737-9 MAX
- The contact of a container ship with the Francis Scott Key Bridge, and subsequent bridge collapse, in Baltimore, Maryland
- A multivehicle work zone collision on Interstate 35 in Austin, Texas.
- A Boeing 737-800 engine fire in Denver, Colorado.
- A medical transport helicopter crash in Canton, Mississippi.
- A gas leak and pipeline explosion in Hutchinson, Kansas.
- A multivehicle crash and postcrash fire on I-80 in Green River, Wyoming.
- A collision between two light rail trains with a derailment in Somerville, Massachusetts.
- A train fire and passenger evacuation in Ridley Park, Pennsylvania.
- A crash of a Bering Air Cessna 208B Grand Caravan in Nome, Alaska.
- A Learjet 55 Medevac crash in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

In addition, we continue to investigate other significant events, including:

- A multivehicle crash, including a motorcoach carrying members of a high school band in Etna, Ohio.
- A multivehicle crash on the Ohio Turnpike in Swanton, Ohio.
- A multivehicle crash between a motorcoach and tractor-trailers parked along a rest area ramp in Highland, Illinois.
- A tanker truck rollover and rupture with anhydrous ammonia release in Teutopolis, Illinois.
- A grade-crossing collision in Pecos, Texas.
- A collision involving a vehicle operating with partial driving automation in San Antonio, Texas.
- A collision between two vehicles resulting in a postcrash fire in Carrizo Springs, Texas.
- Rail employee fatalities and injuries in Illinois, New Jersey, North Carolina, and Wisconsin.
- Natural gas-fueled explosions in Youngstown, Ohio, South Jordan, Utah, and Jackson, Mississippi.
- A multivehicle work zone collision and postcrash fire on I-95 in Kenly, North Carolina.
- A train derailment and hazardous materials release in Manuelito, New Mexico.
- A school bus roadway departure and overturn in Millstone, West Virginia.
- A fire aboard a container ship at Port of Newark, New Jersey.
- A vehicle collision with a stopped school bus, fatally injuring a student pedestrian,

in Excelsior, Wisconsin.

We currently have over a thousand open safety recommendations across all modes as a result of our investigations. In 2024, we issued 132 new safety recommendations and closed 86. Of those closed, excluding those that were classified reconsidered, no longer applicable, and superseded, 58 (77 percent) were closed acceptably, meaning that the recommendation recipient took action to implement the safety recommendation. This includes actions to enhance aviation safety by requiring operators to implement safety management systems, to increase focus on highway bridge maintenance, to help prevent damage to underwater pipelines, and to help prevent train derailments due to unexpected weather conditions. This success rate demonstrates the value of our recommendations. Our recommendations are meaningful, and we appreciate the efforts of recipients to address them.

The NTSB is a small agency that plays a vital role in ensuring public safety and protection of life and property in all that we do. I appreciate the need to right-size the federal workforce; in fact, I strongly agree with that goal. However, the NTSB runs lean; we always have. We have just 430 employees to carry out our mission and are authorized by Congress to go up to 450, though we would need significantly more than that to truly be fully staffed. We punch far above our weight. Everyone at the NTSB plays a role in achieving our mission to make transportation safer. Their hard work, professionalism, and dedication around the clock is the reason that the NTSB is regarded as the world's preeminent safety agency. To complete our investigations and develop recommendations that advance safety changes without delays, we must meet the challenges that come with increasing growth and innovation in transportation. Therefore, it is critical for the agency to have additional resources to respond to events without affecting our timeliness, the quality of our work, or our independence.

I want to thank the committee for your support in last year's NTSB reauthorization bill to increase NTSB's funding for the next 4 years. As a result of Congress' support, we have been able to make much needed progress in hiring for the agency. The vast majority of that growth has been in our investigative offices (Aviation Safety, Highway Safety, Marine Safety, and Railroad, Pipeline, and Hazardous Materials Investigations). Still, despite those efforts, we continue to need additional investigative staff, as well as staff in the operational offices where increases have not occurred to the same extent. This includes staff in General Counsel to work through a backlog of petitions for reconsideration of investigations and airman, mechanic or mariner's certificate appeals, as well as party-related issues and external legal disputes; staff in the Office of the Managing Director to enhance the agency's overall use of data to improve the NTSB's effectiveness and innovation; staff in the Office of the Chief Information Officer to address mandated cybersecurity enhancements and the backlog of Freedom of Information Act requests; and staff in Human Capital and Training to support recruitment, hiring, and other actions critical to developing and retaining a highly-productive workforce.

The fact is, our greatest asset is our workforce, which accounts for over 70 percent

of our costs. We rely on a staff of highly skilled individuals with technical expertise in such areas as aerospace, electrical, and mechanical engineering; chemistry; metallurgy; human performance; and other specialized fields to conduct accident investigations and identify life-saving safety improvements. We must continue to attract and retain talent with expertise in emerging technologies and the transportation systems of tomorrow. And without our workforce, we will not be able to carry out our congressionally mandated mission to protect public safety. Our workforce is highly technical, and approximately 25 percent of the employees are retirement eligible within 1 year; this number increases to approximately 40 percent over the next 5 years. We need to build a deeper bench *now* to prepare for upcoming attrition.

For the NTSB to carry out its mission-critical work, we must have a fully trained workforce ready to respond to more than 1300 new accidents per year, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, and deliver comprehensive, timely, and concise investigation outcomes and safety recommendations to protect life and property and prevent future transportation-related accidents and injuries from occurring.

Before I close, I want to thank Senate and House leaders on both sides of the aisle, as well as President Trump, Vice President Vance, and Secretary Duffy for their tremendous support of the NTSB. As examples, we were granted exemptions from the deferred resignation program and the federal hiring freeze, and we currently have 14 critical positions, nearly all investigative roles, posted on USA Jobs. The Administration and each of you have been very supportive of our work to ensure public safety, and we thank you all for your efforts.

I respectfully request that Congress continue to support our ability to carry out our critical safety mission now and into the future; to recruit, retain, and develop a highly qualified and specialized workforce; and to prepare the agency for investigations involving emerging transportation technologies and systems to improve transportation safety.