

STATEMENT OF THE HONORABLE DONALD D. ENGEN, FEDERAL AVIATION
ADMINISTRATOR, BEFORE THE HOUSE COMMITTEE ON PUBLIC WORKS AND
TRANSPORTATION, SUBCOMMITTEE ON INVESTIGATIONS AND OVERSIGHT,
CONCERNING THE STATUS OF THE AIR TRAFFIC CONTROL SYSTEM.
MARCH 17, 1986.

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee:

I appreciate the invitation to appear before the Subcommittee today to discuss the status of our air traffic control system. I believe that the continued high level of interest in the operation of our Nation's air traffic control system shows how importantly that system is viewed by the public-at-large, and I always welcome the opportunity to affirm to the public that our system is operating safely and well. We have certainly had ample opportunities in which to do that.

In fact, I asked my staff to look over our past Congressional hearing schedule to see how often the FAA has appeared before the Congress to discuss the air traffic control system since the strike in 1981. Our records indicate that, over that period, the FAA has testified on nearly 20 separate occasions on the air traffic control system or on related-personnel issues. That number does not reflect hearings in which air traffic control was but one of several subjects.

I think it's worthy of noting that fact for two reasons. First, with that kind of ongoing examination of the system, there are no hidden issues; virtually every aspect of the system including the people who operate it has been explored in depth. Second, at each of those hearings, the FAA has indicated clearly that the system has been operated safely and that it will continue to be operated safely. Despite the prophecies of some that the system was on the verge of collapse or that the high level of safety could not be maintained, the FAA's assurances of system safety have been borne out repeatedly. Certainly, the system is not without its imperfections. We have never hesitated to indicate that there are areas which need improvement and, indeed, will talk about some of them today. But the most important aspect of the air traffic control system--delivering a high level of safety to the travelling public--has been a constant throughout the rebuilding process, and will remain our top priority. We will simply not permit system safety to be compromised; we will continue to insist that individuals meet our stringent qualification standards to serve as controllers, and we will continue to restrict aircraft operations, when and if needed, rather than overtaxing the capacity of the system.

The past year has seen improvement in the air traffic control system. We are not yet where we want to be in all areas, as I will discuss in a moment, but indicators of system performance

are positive and demonstrate sound achievements on the part of our air traffic control workforce. This past year, for example, air traffic delays were down 17.4% over the prior year.

Systemwide, operational errors by our controllers were down a substantial 25%, and the most significant type of error, which we classify as "major," dropped from 15 in 1984 to only one in 1985 (a 94% decrease). These significant improvements in performance occurred despite an overall increase of about 3% in air traffic last year.

Notwithstanding the positive accomplishments of this past year, we are continuing our efforts to improve the system, notably in the area of staffing where we are striving to achieve greater numbers of full performance level controllers, particularly at certain key facilities.

We continue to monitor closely the air traffic control system in order to assess not only how well the hardware or procedures work but how the people themselves are functioning. My top managers and I do this by visiting field facilities and watching controllers work and talking to them; we do it by flying in the system ourselves to monitor its performance; and we do it by sending out trained evaluation teams to our facilities to observe the overall performance of a facility and its controller workforce. I am vitally concerned with the human factor element of our aviation system, since my prior experience with the

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National Transportation Safety Board and as an aviator tell me that, whenever a person is a key component of the operation of any system, there is the possibility of error.

And, we must be concerned equally both with today's operations and tomorrow's. To maintain the current high levels of system performance and safety, we need the continued commitment and dedication of our controller workforce. Therefore, how they perceive their jobs and the environment in which they work is important to us. In that regard, the GAO's survey of our controller workforce follows our own of the previous year. It is an added tool for me to use in gauging the perceptions of our controllers. I don't agree with all aspects of the report, but I accept and I appreciate the amount of time and effort they have put into it, and view it as a positive effort from which I intend that we benefit. In fact, the data collected by GAO confirms in a number of respects what we have observed ourselves in the system, and affirms to me the directions we have taken in some key areas.

Before discussing some of the specifics of the GAO report, I would like to note what I consider to be an important observation which helps put the GAO report in context: according to the GAO, the vast majority of the controllers and supervisors responding to the questionnaire--about 70% in all--rated the safety of the air traffic control system as adequate to excellent.

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Most of the GAO observations concerning such subjects as workload management and overtime appear to revolve in one respect or another around the issue of staffing. Since the strike in 1981, a key objective of ours has been to recruit and train controllers in order to staff our air traffic control facilities with appropriate numbers of full performance level controllers. We have made substantial progress, though not to the extent I would like. I intend to meet our goal of a controller workforce of 14,480 by the end of this Fiscal Year, and of 15,000 by the end of Fiscal Year 1987, and we will not compromise our standards to do so. The controllers we recruit and train to do this will be of the same high quality that we see now in our centers and terminals. In the interim, while we are continuing toward our target staffing levels, we have taken a number of steps to match traffic levels with the experience levels of our workforce.

Since the strike, a key measure we have implemented to manage workload for our controller workforce has been flow control. The application of our flow control procedures is what is responsible for the occasional delays experienced in the air traffic control system. Those delays, though bothersome, show that the system is working by temporarily holding some airplanes on the ground rather than overloading the system when weather and other such factors affect capacity. Flow control enables us to monitor the

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flow of traffic nationally and, through local and national flow control, shift en route traffic to areas that have the capacity to handle it or delay aircraft on the ground if necessary. We have made a number of refinements to this system since the strike. Additionally, we now have established traffic management units at all of our en route centers which provide further capabilities in terms of enabling us to match traffic with staffing levels. Further, we have designated certain sectors, which we call "red" sectors, that are susceptible to overloads of traffic under certain conditions, in order to refine our ability to match staffing with workload. Today, fewer than one-half of one percent of our sectors fall into this category.

Another step we have taken to balance workload is that certain less demanding functions formerly performed by controllers are now handled by air traffic assistants, which we did not have before the strike. This enables assignment of controllers to the more demanding duties of actually controlling traffic. As necessary, we have relied on additional overtime by our controllers, but within defined limits and on a voluntary basis wherever possible. Moreover, we have increased the productivity of our controller workforce through increasing the amount of time a controller actually controls traffic during an eight hour shift. Before the strike, the average controller was actually controlling traffic about 4 hours per day. Today, our staffing

standard is based on a controller handling traffic an average of 5 1/2 hours per day. Supervisors have also been called upon to work traffic, whereas before the strike this was not necessarily the case. Although some supervisors continue to work traffic more frequently than what we would like, even when we achieve full staffing levels, we will continue to call on our supervisors to work traffic for a reasonable percentage of their time so that they retain currency and full appreciation of the work environment for our controllers.

All of these measures have contributed to our ability to handle safely increased levels of traffic. But they are not ultimate solutions. We must continue to emphasize the training and development of additional full performance level controllers. On the whole, the staffing of terminal facilities has proceeded well. We have experienced more difficulties, however, in achieving our objectives in the center option, particularly at a limited number of facilities which have traditionally been difficult to staff. For example, we have over the years had a difficult time recruiting to fill positions generally in the New York City area. Chicago has also been a difficult facility to staff since well before the strike. Moreover, at these facilities, the rate of certification to the full performance level has not progressed as rapidly as we want.

Therefore, we concluded some time back that there was a need to

devise a special approach for these difficult-to-staff facilities. At this juncture, I would emphasize that rehiring the controllers who were terminated for striking is not a consideration nor, for that matter, will it be. The approach we settled upon as a special effort to more expeditiously achieve the desired number of FPL's and increase staffing at these critical facilities is referred to as our Cross-Option Program, which I will describe for you.

Under the Cross-Option Program, we have designated seven critical facilities where added efforts are needed to increase our complement of full performance level controllers. Those air traffic control centers are located in: Chicago, Indianapolis, Cleveland, Minneapolis, Los Angeles, Oakland, and New York. Under this program, we have solicited voluntary applications, primarily from controllers employed at FAA terminals who would be interested in "crossing over" to the center option. As I noted earlier, we have, as a rule, made greater progress in terminal staffing than in center staffing. Applications could also be filed by controllers at centers or by flight service station specialists. Persons selected for this program are initially screened through a two-week "try-out" session at the new facility. Individuals who complete this process successfully and remain interested in the new facility will enter a 90-day advanced assessment program as a prelude to final selection and a permanent change of station.

The announcement soliciting applications from controllers closed on December 21, 1985, and resulted in 512 applications from personnel at facilities all over the country for the seven target centers. Overall, this level far exceeded our expectations about the number of applicants. Out of these 512 applications, we identified 401 as candidates. These numbers were further reduced to 264 candidates who could be released for the screening program. Significantly, 39 were identified for Chicago Center, which, as noted earlier, has traditionally been one of our most difficult facilities to staff. Los Angeles and Oakland Centers had 38 and 41 candidates respectively; Indianapolis, 48, and Cleveland, 35; Minneapolis, 51; and New York, 12. We are pleased with the results so far of the Cross-Option Program, and are optimistic about the likelihood of success for this program.

To complement our staffing improvements we are achieving through the Cross-Option Program, we have also changed our screening program for the center and terminal options. Therefore, last October, we began recruiting developmental controllers for potential placement anywhere within the hiring region rather than selecting them initially for placement at a specific facility. In other words, new hires are being recruited not for a specific facility, as they have been in the past, but with the understanding that they are subject to being placed at any facility in the region.

In tracking the careers of developmental controllers who completed Academy training, we found that those who achieved a high score in the Academy program also performed well in high activity facilities. Therefore, to use our human resources more efficiently and to reduce field attrition, decisions on whether to place an individual in the center or terminal option and at what facility are not made until developmentals complete the new screening course at the Academy. Following that screening effort, placement decisions will be made based on the Academy score, operational requirements, and employee desires. This, we expect, will result in reduced field loss rates, because developmental controllers will be placed in an option and facility commensurate with their potential and will have a better chance to succeed in the field training program. We are optimistic about our current screening program, and are confident that it will contribute significantly to our efforts to complete the staffing of the air traffic control system.

In short, we have in process some key initiatives which will improve our staffing posture at critical facilities in the short-term, and will better match people and jobs while assuring that needed improvements in field training are made. While these initiatives were planned prior to the GAO survey, I believe you will agree that they address in large measure the

kinds of observations made by the GAO. For example, as additional full performance level controllers are brought on line at given facilities, overtime rates will continue to decline, and more flexibility will be possible in individual work assignments during a given shift.

Before closing, Mr. Chairman, I would like to offer several additional observations. One key point which is important to understand is that the 75% full performance level goal cited by GAO as an FAA requirement does not represent the level necessary to safely control traffic. We have set a goal of 75% full performance level staffing at our facilities as a level which will provide us with flexibility in work assignments within our facilities. In other words, it will better enable our managers to schedule controllers for shifts, reduce some overtime requirements, and permit managers greater flexibility in approving leave. It is important to note, however, that the fact that a controller has not attained the full performance level does not diminish an individual's qualifications on the positions for which that individual has been certified to operate independently. Every controller who is controlling traffic, in other than a training capacity, is fully qualified to perform all aspects of that position. Another point I would make is that we are achieving overall improvements in overtime amounts; they have decreased from 1,084,000 hours in calendar year 1984 to 833,000 in 1985. At centers overtime dropped from

711,000 hours to 560,000, and at terminals we experienced a decrease from 372,000 hours to 273,000. We are striving for additional reductions, although we always expect to continue some overtime in the system as the most efficient use of our resources.

We are keeping controller workload and work hours within safely manageable limits. Special efforts will continue to address the problems at those facilities which have experienced higher workload and overtime rates. Further, our efforts to equip our controllers with better equipment remain a high priority. The introduction of additional equipment in our air traffic facilities, such as the flight data input/output system for which delivery and installation of equipment has already begun, will provide our controllers with equipment that will improve productivity, be more reliable, and increase our overall air traffic capabilities.

In closing, Mr. Chairman, I would reiterate that I view the GAO survey as a positive effort. Insofar as the GAO recommendation that we consider limiting air traffic is concerned, I agree to the extent that our current traffic management efforts do that. As I mentioned earlier, we have a variety of programs in place which are specifically designed to predict and avoid potential workload imbalances. Those programs will continue, as will our efforts to make appropriate refinements. But I am not prepared

to artificially constrain aircraft operations, if that is what the GAO is seeking. The system is operating at a high level of safety today, and we will continue to manage it in a way that the high safety level is preserved in the future.

Our controller workforce has done an outstanding job since the illegal controllers' strike. We have weathered the most difficult part of the journey toward full recovery, and I will state very frankly that we could not have made it this far without the high level of commitment and dedication we have seen in our controller workforce. More remains to be done before we are satisfied that our rebuilding efforts have resulted in optimum efficiencies throughout the system, and we are doing what needs to be done, particularly in the area of increased staffing at certain facilities.

As we have throughout the rebuilding period, we will closely monitor the state of the air traffic control system to assure that no actions are taken that could adversely affect safety. The continued safety of the system remains our highest priority.

Although my statement today has addressed what I perceive to be the key issues raised in the GAO report, we are prepared to discuss with you more fully other aspects of the air traffic control system or efforts we have underway that relate to the kinds of issues mentioned by the GAO.

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That completes my prepared statement, Mr. Chairman. We would be pleased to respond to questions you may have at this time.