Volunteer students in the Air Traffic Control Training Program at the FAA Academy in Oklahoma City, Okla., practice guiding planes in and out of an airport in a tower simulation system. Two students, two instructors and a pseudo-pilot use the system during the final phase of initial tower training.

By Heather Wines, Gannett News Service

Fewer air controllers could lead to more mistakes, union says

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By James R. Carroll and Nicole Gaudiano, Gannett News Service

WASHINGTON — Nearly 1,100 fewer air traffic controllers are guiding planes through the nation's skies than three years ago, even though flights are increasing.

The National Air Traffic Controllers Association, the union that represents those who "move tin," says some facilities are critically understaffed, causing delays and increasing the possibility of mistakes by tired controllers working 10-hour days and six-day weeks.

"Without a doubt, I would say this rubber band has been stretched as far as it's going to go and it's not a matter of whether it's going to break, but when it's going to break," said Hamid Ghaffari, president of the union's Pacific region.

The union, embroiled in a labor dispute with the Federal Aviation Administration, claims staffing problems played a role in three air crashes this year, including the Aug. 27 crash of a Comair jet in Lexington, Ky., that killed 49 of 50 people aboard.

One controller was handling tower and radar services when the Comair flight took off from the wrong runway and crashed. FAA policy required two controllers. The FAA says a second controller wouldn't have made a difference; the union says it might have averted tragedy.

"Lexington proved that it's going to happen, and it's going to happen again," said Steve McCoy, union representative at the Northern California approach control facility in Sacramento.

The FAA says the nation's airport towers and radar facilities are adequately staffed to move planes efficiently and safely, and hiring and training is on track to cope with a wave of retirements that has begun.

"We are not understaffed today, broadly," FAA Deputy Administrator Robert Sturgell said. "There are some small

JOINING THE RANKS

It's a long process. Some details:

Who can become an air traffic controller?

The Federal Aviation Administration hires former military controllers, current or former Department of Defense or FAA employees with air traffic control experience, and graduates of FAA-approved programs at 14 colleges and universities.

Other candidates must have three years of work experience in any field, a bachelor's degree or an equivalent combination of education and experience.

Those with no previous experience in the field must pass a pre-employment test measuring their ability to learn the job.

Other basic requirements include being a U.S. citizen, being less than 31 years old at the time of a job offer and passing a medical exam, drug test and background check.

What's the training like?

Most candidates must go through the FAA Academy in Oklahoma City, where candidates learn about airway system fundamentals, FAA regulations, controller equipment and the capabilities of different aircraft during a 12-week program.

Upon graduation, they head to one of more than 300 air traffic control facilities. They are classified as "developmental controllers" until they complete all requirements to become fully certified, which can take three to five years. The FAA wants to reduce that time frame to no more than three years.

What's the job pay?

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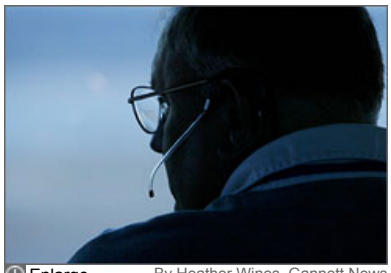
The average starting salary for a controller trainee is $31,600, according to the FAA. That figure does not include "locality pay," an additional payment to offset differences in living expenses throughout the country. A controller's salary increases with training, certifications and the type of facility. By the end of the first year on the job, the average salary is about $50,000, including locality pay.



Enlarge By Heather Wines, Gannett News Service

An air traffic controller guides planes at Ronald Reagan Washington National Airport in Arlington, Va. According to data from the National Air Traffic Controllers Association, Reagan National is at 81% of its authorized staffing level.

HIGH-STRESS WORK

WASHINGTON -- Richard Loewen's job is intense.

The 43-year-old Texan works as a controller in the Dallas-Fort Worth International Airport tower, the third busiest tower in the country.

"For 80-90 minutes, you are solving three-dimensional puzzles in your mind where some of the pieces are not yet moving and some are going 250 miles an hour. You can't say stop and each piece has at least 100 people on it," Loewen said.

"You never stop talking. While I'm issuing an instruction to one aircraft, I still have to know what the other aircraft are doing. It's mentally exhausting. On hard days, busy days, where there's bad weather, it will wring you out."

While many people work long hours, Loewen and other controllers say it's different knowing one mistake could kill hundreds of people.

And the job is even more difficult now that some controllers are working longer weeks, longer days and longer periods without a break, according to union representatives at more than 40 Federal Aviation Administration facilities interviewed by Gannett News Service and *The (Louisville) Courier-Journal*.

Many controllers also said that, despite their seniority, they no longer can get vacations when they want them because the FAA fears being caught short-handed.

Under work rules the FAA imposed Sept. 3, FAA supervisors can tell controllers whether they can leave the building on a break and what they can wear.

FAA Deputy Administrator Robert Sturgell said he believes "things are settling down" since the rules were imposed. The union and FAA recently reached an agreement on limited aspects of the vacation policy, but union officials say the complaints largely remain.

Six-day weeks were common for several years after the 1981 controllers' strike as the FAA rebuilt the force. Those days have returned, according to the National Air Traffic Controllers

Administrator Robert Sturgell said. "There are some small number of facilities where we do need to increase staff. There are also many facilities where we are fine, where we are even overstaffed."

For example, Sturgell said, Atlanta's tower lacks enough personnel, but towers in St. Louis and Pittsburgh, where some airlines have either stopped or reduced operations, have too many.

Federal officials did not provide facility-by-facility staffing levels, but figures provided to Gannett News Service and *The (Louisville) Courier-Journal* by the controllers' union show towers and radar facilities in California, Chicago, New York, Dallas and other high-volume locations are moving airplanes with as few as 60% of the number of controllers that the FAA and the union agreed constituted full staffing in 2003, the most recent benchmark.

ONLINE DATA: Look up staffing at your airport

At Hartsfield-Jackson Atlanta International Airport's tower, the nation's busiest, 34 controllers handle takeoffs and landings, well below the 55 that the union and FAA agreed in 2003 were needed. Since then, traffic has increased and a new runway has opened, complicating the workload.

"We're working six-day work weeks because we do not have the staffing," said Vince Polk, a union safety chairman who works in the tower.

Internal FAA operations logs reveal that staffing problems in November caused controllers to increase the separation, or distance, between planes out of Charlotte; Washington-Dulles, and New England airports. Union officials say that can cause delays for airlines and their passengers.

Personnel shortages also forced the FAA to take the unusual step of placing green trainees in some of the most high-pressure facilities, such as the Atlanta tower and Dallas-Fort Worth approach control, according to the union.

While some new technologies are being put into air traffic control facilities, it has not changed the need for more controllers, according to NATCA President Pat Forrey.

"God forbid that we have a major catastrophe or accident because of a staffing shortage," he said. "I think that's probably the great exception to the rule, but every time you make that more a probability or a possibility, you're threatening the safety of the system and the traveling public."

Safe vs. stressed

Union officials, the FAA and aviation analysts agree on at least one thing: the United States has an enviable safety record in aviation.

Major commercial aviation accidents are extremely rare. The Comair crash was the first major accident in the nation since Nov. 12, 2001, when an American Airlines jet crashed in Queens, N.Y., killing 265 people.

The number of times planes get too close in the air has dropped while the number of times planes end up on the wrong runway has been relatively flat from 1998 to 2005, FAA statistics show.

The industry's safety record "speaks for itself — it's the safest it's ever been," said David Castelveter, spokesman for the Air Transport Association, which represents most major U.S. airlines.

But operational errors — mistakes made by controllers — rose from 894 in 1998 to 1,506 in 2005, according to FAA data. That's a 68% increase.

An operational error can be as minor as letting planes get a tenth of a mile closer than the rules allow or as significant as putting two planes on a collision course.

At Washington Air Route Traffic Control Center in Virginia, controllers committed 23 operational errors between Oct. 1 and

Association, the controllers' union.

For example, at the Los Angeles International Airport tower, 21 controllers out of 36 were scheduled to work six-day weeks between Nov. 26 and Dec. 9, according to the union. Seven of those controllers worked six-day weeks twice during that period.

Diane Aceves, union representative at the Los Angeles tower, said the controllers volunteered to put in the extra time, but the list of those willing to do so is getting shorter.

"We don't see how it's going to be fixed anytime soon and we're all looking at six-day work weeks for the rest of our careers," she said.

Fewer breaks mean more stress and more mistakes, said Mike "Hammer" Conely, NATCA president at Dallas-Fort Worth approach control.

"You, as part of the flying public, don't want me working an hour and a half, two hours at a time," he said. "You want me to work traffic and get a break so my mind can recuperate and then get in there and work some more planes."

Union representatives say animosity and tension are running high.

"I guarantee you that the Number 1 conversation on the floor is not airplanes it's the imposed work rules and staffing," said Scott Conde, vice president of the controllers union at Oakland Center. "You run human beings on a continual basis beyond average work levels in deplorable conditions and maintaining an adequate level of safety is impossible."

-- James R. Carroll and Nicole Gaudiano, The (Louisville) Courier-Journal

TROUBLED TOWERS

Controllers leaving: FAA underestimates retirements

GNS video: Inside the control tower

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Dec. 11, said Rich Santa, the union representative there. That's 10 more than the same period last year.

Union figures show 363 controllers and trainees at the center. That's slightly above the 2003 authorized level the union originally provided to Gannett News Service, but the union later said the center had a higher authorized number of 412.

"We are tired," Santa said. "They're working us like crazy."

Larry Newman, a commercial pilot and the Air Line Pilots Association's air traffic services group chairman, said his group believes there is a "slow but steady erosion in our safety net."

Controllers sound "more stressed out," Newman said.

Flight operations per controller, one measure of workload, was at 9,348 in fiscal 2006, down from 1999. But it's higher than in fiscal 2003 when the average was 8,779, FAA numbers show.

Systemwide, the number of flight operations — by commercial airlines, private planes and military aircraft — that controllers handle has risen from 138.4 million in 2003 to 140.7 million in 2005, according to FAA data.

But that's no cause for alarm, federal officials say. Overtime is down and safety yardsticks indicate staffing is appropriate, the FAA's Sturgell said in an interview.

Initiatives to increase controller productivity, changes in schedule to make controllers available when needed, along with other policies and technology will improve efficiency in coming years, the agency has said.

Sturgell cited Atlanta as an example. At that airport, new technology has cut pilot-to-controller communications 30% to 40%, reducing the workload, he said.

Numbers debated

Figures showed 14,618 air traffic controllers working in more than 300 FAA facilities nationwide at the end of the federal fiscal year in September. That compares with 15,691 controllers three years ago.

Whether each facility has the number of controllers it needs is hard to say.

The FAA did not respond to an Oct. 4 request, filed under the Freedom of Information Act, for the number of controllers working at each facility. The agency is working on a new staffing standard for each facility but doesn't expect to complete it until spring.

GNS and *The Courier-Journal* relied on facility-by-facility statistics gathered by the union and compared them with the "authorized numbers," which the union and FAA negotiated in 1998 and adjusted through 2003.

Federal aviation officials argue those benchmarks are no longer relevant, though about half the nation's air traffic facilities have staff levels at 90% or more of their authorized levels.

On average, staffing by certified and trainee controllers is 89% of the authorized figure. That average includes 29 facilities with more controllers than the authorized level.

The union says those staffing numbers look better than they really are because it can take up to five years for a trainee to become fully qualified.

Trainees comprise 20% to 30% of some controllers at some facilities as the agency tries to keep up with a wave of retirements of controllers who were hired after President Reagan fired more than 10,000 striking controllers in 1981.

The FAA plans to hire 11,851 controllers through fiscal 2015, for a total of 16,102, to offset retirements and meet the expected 25% increase in air traffic.

Accidents, incidents and delays

The union claims staffing problems contributed to two fatal air crashes this year in Indiana and Illinois involving small planes.

On April 20, five Indiana University graduate school music students were killed when their small plane crashed in

fog south of Bloomington.

On Oct. 26, an Indiana economic development official was killed when his plane crashed near Lawrenceville, Ill., on approach to Mid-America Air Center airport.

"We have reached the conclusion that the absence of an experienced approach controller at Terre Haute TRACON (Terminal Radar Approach Control) working these flights definitely had an impact on these events," NATCA Great Lakes Regional Vice President Bryan Zilonis said in a statement.

The FAA's Sturgell said he couldn't comment on whether staffing played a role in the accidents.

The National Transportation Safety Board is investigating and had no comment, said spokesman Terry Williams.

At the Los Angeles Air Route Traffic Control Center, a controller missed seeing an airliner and a military jet getting too close earlier this month because he was handling too many planes, said NATCA's Ghaffari.

The NTSB confirmed that on Dec. 6, a United Airbus and a Navy DC-9 came within two-and-a-half miles of each other at the same altitude over Beatty, Nev.

Operations logs from numerous air traffic control facilities show that controllers have spaced out traffic due to staffing shortages, which the union said can lead to delays.

For example, on Nov. 7, the Washington Air Route Traffic Control Center sent an advisory that it needed 20 miles between planes leaving Charlotte, to a certain navigation point instead of the normal five miles. The reason given was "staffing."

Asked whether there were delays anywhere because of staffing shortages, the FAA's Sturgell said, "I'm not aware of a facility that has been consistently understaffed to the point where it's causing a delay at a particular place."

John Nance, a former airline pilot, aviation analyst and author, heard a lot of the same debates over safety in the 1980s, before and after the controllers' strike. Between 1985 and 1989, more than 1,400 people died in multiple aviation disasters.

The FAA is "stressing the system already stressed to the max — that's dumb," he said.

"What we've basically got here," Nance said, "is the FAA trying to ignore history and we are going to pay a heavy price if this continues."

Contributing: Robert Benincasa, Gannett News Service; James R. Carroll reports for The (Louisville) Courier-Journal

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