

STATEMENT OF
THE HONORABLE JERRY F. COSTELLO
SUBCOMMITTEE ON AVIATION
HEARING ON
AIR TRAFFIC CONTROL FACILITY STAFFING
JUNE 11, 2008

- I welcome everyone to our Subcommittee hearing on air traffic control facility staffing.

- The flying public relies on our air traffic controllers every day to make sure runways operate safely, flight patterns are checked, systematic takeoffs and arrivals occur, and most importantly, that airplanes maintain separation. They do these activities 130,000 times every day, making air travel the safest form of transportation in the United States.

- However, we are facing a serious problem in the controller workforce. Because of the PATCO strike and subsequent firing of air traffic controllers in 1981, most controllers were

hired during the mid to late 1980s. As a result of this massive hiring over twenty years ago, many controllers are becoming eligible to retire and it is clear that the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) was not and is not ready to deal with the situation. As early as 2002, the Government Accountability Office (GAO) warned of a controller retirement crisis.

- Further exacerbating the problem has been the FAA's imposition of a contract on the air traffic controllers. According to the National Air Traffic Controllers (NATCA), since the work rules were imposed on the controllers, retirement and other attrition numbers have increased substantially; fatigue and operational errors are at an all time high; and morale is extremely low.

- Already, in FY2008, the FAA has lost 954 experienced controllers – almost five controllers per day. We are losing valuable, experienced controllers. According to NATCA, since the beginning of FY2007, 40,000 years of experience has been lost.

- This situation has some serious efficiency and safety consequences. Around the country, because of staffing shortages and misalignment between experienced personnel and new hires, more experienced controllers are being asked to work longer hours to handle increasingly congested runways and airspace. Fatigue is becoming an issue that must be addressed and is creating risks to the operational efficiency and safety of the air traffic system.

- A good example is the rate of runway incursions. So far this year, there have been 16 type A and B incursions. I believe both controller fatigue and scheduling are factors in these incursions and must be addressed.

- I have said time and again that the FAA tends to be reactive, not proactive – another example is the problem with controller training and hiring.

- Though the FAA prides itself on reducing the time it takes to train a controller, there are many facilities where controllers are not receiving their training in a timely manner. I am concerned that, unless this problem is dealt with, there will be an increase in the attrition rate for new hires, making a bad situation worse.

- The numbers FAA uses in its Controller Workforce Plans (CWP) can be deceiving. While the CWP is accurate that the number of controllers has increased since 2004, the FAA does not differentiate between a certified controller and one still in training. This is a critical piece of information that must be reported to all stakeholders.

- According to the DOT IG, the number of controllers in training has increased by 62 percent, while the number of certified controllers has decreased by 11 percent. The FAA's controller workforce is dramatically changing and it needs to acknowledge that and work with stakeholders and Congress to keep our air transportation system running safely and efficiently.

- With that, I want to again welcome our witnesses today and I look forward to their testimony.

- Before I recognize Mr. Petri for his opening statement, I ask unanimous consent to allow 2 weeks for all Members to revise and extend their remarks and to permit the submission of additional statements and materials by Members and witnesses. Without objection, so ordered.