

STATEMENT OF
THE HONORABLE JAMES L. OBERSTAR
SUBCOMMITTEE ON TRANSPORTATION AND INFRASTRUCTURE
HEARING ON "AIR TRAFFIC CONTROL FACILITY STAFFING"
JUNE 11, 2008

- I want to thank Chairman Costello and Ranking Member Petri for calling today's hearing.
- Mr. Chairman, the nation's air traffic controllers, working at airport towers, terminal radar approach control centers, and en route centers, handle at any given moment, approximately 5,000 planes in the national airspace. According to the National Air Traffic Controllers' Association, in one year, "controllers handle an average of 64 million takeoffs and landings."
- The air traffic control system is highly technical. The system relies on advanced computing, sophisticated communications and a wide array of surveillance technology. However, the glue that makes this sophisticated system work – that ensures safe separation of aircraft and smooth traffic flows – is the controller workforce. They are critical to the safe and efficient operations of the nation's air traffic control system.
- Today's roughly 15,000 Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) controller workforce is facing a serious challenge. Because so many controllers, over 12,000, were hired in the years after the 1981 strike and subsequent firing of air traffic controllers, the FAA is facing a retirement bubble.
- Over the next 10 years, over 70 percent of FAA's nearly 15,000 air traffic controllers will be eligible to retire. FAA estimates that it could lose more than 15,000 air traffic controllers between 2008 and 2017. The FAA plans to hire approximately 17,000 controllers over the next 10 years to have enough recruits in the pipeline to meet the positions lost. The FAA states that it hired 1,815 controllers in fiscal year (FY) 2007; it plans to hire 1,877 in FY 2008, and 1,914 in FY 2009.
- Unfortunately, it is not clear that, in spite of the recent hiring initiatives, the FAA is ready to cope with this crisis in controller staffing. It also may be underestimating the problem. The FAA is predicting that between 700 and 900 controllers will retire each year. However, in 2007, 1,559 controllers left their jobs,

including 828 retirements. The acceleration of controllers leaving their jobs could be directly attributable to the imposition of the 2005 contract (imposed work rules).

- However, hiring new controllers is a complex process. Controllers are highly skilled professionals and it takes several years to train a controller. According to the FAA, in FY 2007, the failure rate for controller trainees in both the FAA Academy and in air traffic control facilities is approximately four and eleven percent, respectively. Therefore, replacing a controller who retires must begin several years in advance.
- That is why I am concerned about the current staffing of FAA air traffic control facilities, the rate of retirements, and the pace at which the FAA is able to hire and train new controllers.
- I am also concerned about the ratio of experienced controllers and developmental controllers at FAA air traffic control facilities. According to the Department of Transportation Inspector General, the number of developmental controllers (controllers in training) increased by 62 percent between 2004 and 2007. In some cases, developmental controllers represent a substantial portion of the workforce and, in at least one facility, the majority of the controller staff are developmental. This could present serious safety and operational issues, including controller fatigue, and I want to know what the FAA is doing about it.
- It is imperative that the FAA has enough controllers in the right place, at the right time, with sufficient experience to safely manage the air traffic system today and to accommodate the future demands for air transportation.
- Thank you again Chairman Costello for your leadership on this issue. I also want to thank the witnesses for sharing their testimony with us today.