

Congressional Testimony of  
Steven A. Wallace  
Certified Professional Controller, Federal Aviation Administration  
Before the House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee  
Subcommittee on Aviation  
Wednesday, June 11, 2008

My name is Steven A. Wallace. I am an air traffic controller at the Miami Air Route Traffic Control Center located in Miami, Florida.

I started my career with the FAA in November, 1991, at the Air Traffic Control Academy in Oklahoma City. I was permanently assigned to Miami Center in February, 1992. I have been the President of the local chapter of the National Air Traffic Controllers Association since January of 2003. I was the Vice President from 2001 to 2003 and the representative for my work area from 1995 to 2001.

I would consider myself expert to testify as to the changes in staffing and training at Miami Center and the effect of those changes upon the individual air traffic controller.

I began air traffic controller training immediately after arriving at Miami Center and was fully certified as a full performance-level controller in October of 1995.

At that time, there were 196 fully certified controllers and 108 developmental controllers, and Miami Center handled just over 1.5 million aircraft operations a year. While in training, my advancement classes were spaced several months apart. During those gaps in my training, I would season and gain experience using my newly acquired skills and knowledge. My total training time was just over 3 years.

Today, there are 192 fully certified controllers and 84 developmental controllers and Miami Center routinely posts operational numbers exceeding 2.5 million aircraft operations per year.

Fifteen years ago, on a busy day Miami Center would average 5,000 operations. During days when the traffic was high, it was mandated that many of the busiest positions be staffed with 3 controllers. 5 years ago, that mandate was 2 controllers. Now, it is not uncommon to have no one to help you when we work 10,000 operations.

Over the years, the airspace within Miami Center has been sliced up into smaller pieces in an effort to limit the number of airplanes that an air traffic controller has to watch at any given time. This has only meant that more positions must be staffed by the same number of controllers as there were in 1992.

An Operational Error occurs when two airplanes get too close to each other. Such errors are on the rise; and to disguise the fact that I might make more errors while I work more aircraft by myself, the FAA has changed the definition of an error - effectively camouflaging error frequency, but in no way actually decreasing risk.

The last thing that anyone wants is for two aircraft to get too close to one another or an obstacle. It is my job to ensure that never happens, and my coworkers and I meet that challenge everyday with passionate professionalism. Controllers have adopted the mantra, “an error will not occur on my watch,” and each of us is dedicated to seeing that passengers get from point A to point B safely - not 99.5 percent of the time, but 100 percent of the time. I would not want my family on the aircraft that is less than 100-percent protected by a competent, seasoned air traffic controller.

However, constantly working in this manner wears on you. And with the number of controllers in Miami and the rest of the system continuing to dwindle, the level of stress and fatigue endured by controllers will continue to escalate.

Miami Center’s authorized number for full performance level controllers was 279 for many years. This number was the result of many factors including the number of aircraft and operational positions. Now, that number is 197. This is nothing more than a way to conceal the fact that they cannot attract and keep enough air traffic controllers at Miami Center.

The FAA likes to say that it is managing resources better than they did years ago. The better resource management that the Agency refers to translates to mandatory six-day work weeks comprised of 10-hour days for me.

Ten years ago, it was unacceptable for an En Route controller like myself to work more than two hours on-position without a break. Now, my coworkers and I work 3 hours at a time. I have watched as my fellow coworkers have retired as soon as they were eligible because they want their lives back. The six-day workweeks, ten-hour days on rotating shifts, and the increased stress of working at your highest-performance level without making a mistake has taken its toll on many of my coworkers. I have watched as many of them have become so stressed out, so worn down, so fatigued, and so preoccupied with not making a fatal mistake, that they have quit rather than run the risk of being the person on position when an accident occurs.

The developmental controllers that are being hired are leaving in record numbers because they do not want to make the kind of commitment that is necessary because their pay has been changed and their working conditions are unacceptable. Many of the developmental controllers have left because they see the same thing that many of my coworkers and I see: there is no quick fix to this problem.

Two years ago, Miami Center was designated as a “focus facility” by the FAA due to our staffing shortage. Developmental controllers were poured into the facility and the FAA changed their training plan. Many of those developmental controllers have sat for almost two years without any training.

While it is true that they may still make it to full performance-level within 4 years, it will be at the cost of vital on-the-job-training and first-hand experience. The FAA has changed the training plan and eliminated the seasoning that used to be a prerequisite to advancement. Our newest hires recognize that their careers are being jeopardized by the FAA before they even sit down at the scope for the first time, and each developmental and trainee, just like the seasoned 15- and 20-year veteran, fears being the one on position when an accident occurs.

At Miami Center, 17 developmental controllers have resigned since July of last year. That is 17 more than all of the other years that I have worked as an air traffic controller. Four additional developmental controllers have failed the training program. The FAA has taken many supervisors and moved others to jobs outside of the job of talking to airplanes. This has only exacerbated the staffing problem. I have watched as 12 coworkers have left due to mental or physical illness from stress and fatigue.

In a workforce of 192 fully-certified controllers and 84 developmental controllers, these 33 retirees, training failures and resignations represent 18 percent of the workforce, leaving Miami Center with essentially the same number of controllers that we had in 1992, when we were working more than one-million fewer annual operations. There will be 19 controllers eligible to retire at Miami Center at the end of this year, even more next year, and still more until 2011 and beyond. The problems at Miami Center of understaffing, and the associated fatigue, increased delays, inadequate training, and shrinking safety margins, will only continue to get worse for the foreseeable future unless something is done soon to alleviate the situation.

The current staffing levels at our facility, like many major facilities across the countries, cannot adequately sustain the level of safety that the flying public expects and that air traffic controllers demand. Because the FAA has failed to take the necessary steps to fix the air traffic controller staffing crisis two-and-a-half decades in the making, we are asking Congress to step in and bring the system some much-needed relief.