Testimony of The Honorable Dan Meuser (PA-09)
Member Day Hearing
House Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure
April 14, 2023

I want to begin by thanking Chairman Graves, Ranking Member Larsen, and Members of the Committee for giving me the opportunity to testify before you today as you consider various Transportation and Infrastructure priorities including the FAA Reauthorization. I am here today to inform the Committee of the four main reasons why it is important to reopen the Essential Air Service Program for rural airports.

First, reopening the Essential Air Service Program is valuable to rural airports that are lacking commercial air service. The program is meant to support rural communities in accessing the nations' airspace with commercial air service and reopening the program for communities who have lost this important resource.

The Essential Air Service Program brings with it tremendous economic and quality of life benefits to the residents it serves. The absence of commercial air service leaves rural communities without access to the nation's air space, forcing residents to travel hours to the closest airport for service. This hinders economic growth for business in the region and creates an obstacle to revitalization efforts in the community.

An example in my district where a town is being negatively impacted by the lack of air service is Williamsport, a town of 27,603 people with nearly 200,000 people living in surrounding counties. This region of Northeast Pennsylvania is also home to six colleges and universities and more than 130 businesses. Yet, the nearest airport is located an hour and a half away in Central Pennsylvania. Williamsport Regional Airport lost commercial air service in October 2021 when

American Airlines pulled out of the market. This decision has left the surrounding communities without commercial air service for over a year. Williamsport originally qualified for Essential Air Service but did not enroll in the program because in 2008 U.S. Airways decided to provide service to the community without program funding. U.S. Airways only made this decision to fly without program funding when the airline found out that it was outbid by a competitor. Unfortunately, Williamsport's qualification got pulled when Congress decided to close the program during previous FAA reauthorizations, leaving Williamsport without a viable option to attract a commercial airline. Williamsport is not alone in lacking air service in the United States. There are thirteen other airports that recently lost air service and this statistic will only grow over the next few years.

Finally, reopening the Essential Air Service Program for rural communities could alleviate congestion at major airport hubs by having smaller airports share the load. Imagine your constituents having to drive four hours round trip to drop their daughter off for a trip. Routing more flights through a rural airport would ease congestion on highways and at major hubs. This program would improve air safety for passengers flying across the country, during a time in which the FAA has noted "too many close calls" of serious runway incursions.

However, I introduced two bills that address this issue. H.R.2467, the *Supporting Middle America's Airports Act* which would reopen the Essential Air Service Program for a three-year period. H.R. 2466, the *Essential Air Service Reform Act* which would modify key provisions of the program to reduce overall cost and set it on a more fiscally responsible course. These bills would allow rural airports that qualify for the program to receive this essential support. Further, the *Essential Air Service Reform Act* would reform the program to serve these airports without the need to raise spending. The Transportation and Infrastructure Committee has the opportunity

to restore commercial air service in rural communities by considering my legislation in the FAA Reauthorization.

Transportation and infrastructure are core functions of governments and ensuring access to air service is an important component of that work.