

## **Union: Chronic shortage of air traffic controllers a crisis**

October 13, 2015

By JOAN LOWY

WASHINGTON (AP) — A chronic shortage of controllers has reached a crisis that will lead to widespread flight delays if left unchecked, officials for the union that represents air traffic controllers said Tuesday.

The Federal Aviation Administration has failed to meet its hiring goals for controllers for five consecutive years, leaving the number of controllers at its lowest level in 27 years at a time when air traffic is increasing, National Air Traffic Controllers Association officials said at a news conference.

The number of "certified professional controllers" — those who are no longer in training and can direct air traffic without assistance from a more experienced controller — has declined 10 percent from the recent peak of 11,753 in September 2012 as of Aug. 22 of this year, the union said.

Meanwhile, of the 10,859 certified controllers, 30 percent are currently eligible to retire, the union said.

Trish Gilbert, the union's executive vice president, likened the situation to April 2013 when automatic, government-wide spending cuts imposed by Congress forced the furlough of 10 percent of the controller workforce. During the seven days the furlough was in place, 12,760 flights were delayed — about three times the normal number. The disruptions were greatest at some of the nation's busiest airports. Amid complaints from disgruntled travelers, Congress passed an exception to the budget cuts for controllers.

Gilbert denied the union simply wants to increase its numbers.

"We see that they are in dire straits and therefore we must speak up," she said. "We have far too few controllers in our towers and radars rooms."

The FAA said in a statement that the agency shares the union's "frustration with air traffic controller staffing levels."

"The past government shutdown and budget cuts closed the FAA's controller training academy for nine months, delaying initial training for several classes of new air traffic controllers. As a result, the FAA has been working hard to hire at an increased rate to meet its air traffic controller staffing targets," the statement said.

Gilbert blamed the situation on "bureaucratic inertia." She said FAA officials have long been aware of the problem and have been working to resolve it, but have simply been unable to overcome red tape and lack of communication, among other issues.

Part of the blame belongs to Congress since the FAA has also been hindered by uncertainty over how much money the agency will be able to spend, making planning difficult, she said. In 2013, the agency was able to hire almost no controllers because of budgetary uncertainty, she said.

The shortage has meant controllers at some of the nation's busiest air traffic facilities have been working six-day work weeks for years, union officials said. They said safety isn't at risk, but they also acknowledged that controllers' work schedules are causing widespread chronic fatigue.

NASA warned the FAA four years ago that chronic controller fatigue was undermining safety and urged the agency to eliminate six-day work weeks as soon as possible. The FAA had asked NASA to study controller scheduling and its impact on fatigue.

Jim Marinitti, the union's southern regional vice president, said controllers at the Atlanta approach control facility, one of the nation's busiest air traffic facilities, have been routinely working mandatory six-day weeks since 2006.

The continual six-day work weeks "definitely raise the safety risk," said John Goglia, a former National Transportation Safety Board member and aviation safety expert.

There are an abundance of studies that show "chronic fatigue just sneaks up on you," he said. "You think you're thinking right, but you're thinking in slow motion."

The union's complaints were especially unusual because labor relations at the FAA have improved markedly during the Obama administration, and the controllers association rarely airs complaints publicly.

As of August, the FAA had only hired 1,178 of a planned 1,772 air traffic controllers it had planned to hire in the 2015 federal budget year, which ended on Sept. 30, Gilbert said.

The union provided some examples of the problems at five busy approach control facilities:

- The Atlanta facility has 74 fully certified controllers, 27 percent short. Eighteen are eligible for retirement.

- The Chicago facility has 70 fully certified controllers, 30 percent short. Twenty-seven are eligible for retirement.

- The Dallas-Fort Worth facility has an all-time low of 52 fully certified controllers, a drop of 38 percent since 2006. Controllers have been working mandatory six-day work weeks since January.

- The Houston facility has 73 fully certified controllers, 22 percent short.

- The New York facility has a 25 year-low of 147 fully certified controllers, 35 percent short. Many are working six-day weeks.