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# **PROFESSIONAL AVIATION SAFETY SPECIALISTS**

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**STATEMENT OF DAVID SPERO  
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BEFORE THE SENATE COMMITTEE ON COMMERCE, SCIENCE  
AND TRANSPORTATION  
ON  
STRENGTHENING THE AVIATION WORKFORCE  
MARCH 16, 2023**

Chair Cantwell, Ranking Member Cruz, and members of the Committee, thank you for inviting me to testify on behalf of the Professional Aviation Safety Specialists, AFL-CIO (PASS) to discuss strengthening the aviation workforce.

PASS represents approximately 11,000 Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) and Department of Defense employees throughout the United States. PASS-represented employees in the FAA install, maintain, support and certify air traffic control and national defense equipment, inspect and oversee the commercial and general aviation industries, develop flight procedures, and perform quality analyses of complex aviation systems used in air traffic control and national defense in the United States and abroad. PASS members work to ensure the safety and efficiency of the aviation system that transports over 2.9 million airline passengers across more than 29 million square miles of airspace (domestic and U.S. airspace over oceans) every day. The diversity of the PASS-represented workforce provides insight into the safety of the system they maintain and the industry they oversee. PASS members are tasked with ensuring that the U.S. aviation system remains the gold standard of safety.

There has been a significant focus on recruitment and retention. It is worth noting that PASS is currently in negotiations on new collective bargaining agreements with the FAA for the employees we represent in the Air Traffic Organization (ATO) and Aviation Safety (AVS). This process presents a significant opportunity for PASS to assist the agency by negotiating over ways to enhance recruitment and retention. PASS appreciates the opportunity to share information and recommendations regarding the FAA workforce.

### **Air Traffic Organization**

The largest PASS bargaining unit is the ATO Technical Operations unit, consisting of technical employees who install, maintain, repair and certify the radar, navigation, communication and power systems making up the air traffic control system.

Within Technical Operations, PASS represents FAA airway transportation systems specialists, sometimes referred to more simply as technicians. Systems specialists ensure the functionality of communications systems, computer systems, navigational aids and power systems vital to safe air travel and the mission of pilots and controllers. In addition, Flight Inspection Services (FIS) professionals and aeronautical professionals in Mission Support Services (MSS) support pilots, air traffic administrative professionals and aviation planners through the development and maintenance of all public instrument flight procedures and airways.

PASS has long called attention to not only the need for sufficient technical staffing but also the lack of a reliable staffing model on which to base staffing decisions and placement. Along with sufficient staffing goes sufficient training. PASS is concerned with the training for both current employees and new hires. New hires in these areas of operation undergo extensive training that can last months, if not years. In addition, training slowed considerably due to the pandemic, which delayed technical education for Technical Operations staff. While some online training was made available, in-person training on critical equipment and software that serve the National Airspace System (NAS) is vital. We can collaboratively develop better ways to ensure workable training models. Furthermore, as technicians reach retirement age, there aren't enough fully

trained employees to step into their shoes. It is imperative that the agency develop a model which allows for sufficient training for new hires and allows more seasoned employees to pass along their expertise to these employees prior to retirement.

The work of FAA technicians is vital to the safe and efficient operation of the National Airspace System (NAS). It is also vital that this workforce be provided with the resources to permit them to be successful in this endeavor.

This point is illustrated not only through the safe functioning of the NAS but also through recent milestones achieved by PASS-represented employees. For instance, in 2021, members of the Navigation Communications, or NavCom, team in Orlando, Fla., successfully replaced the glideslope facility shelters at the Orlando Executive and Orlando International airports. The glideslope is part of the facility's Instrument Landing System (ILS), which provides aircraft with precision vertical and horizontal navigation guidance information during approach and landing.

The team was responsible for disassembling the prior shelters and reestablishing new infrastructures to house the equipment. In fact, the group had to rebuild part of the ILS. The capstone of the project were the flight inspections that determined the rebuilt systems were safe for flight. An enormous undertaking, the FAA employees completed the projects in just over a month, saving the agency both time and money. Given the current staffing models, this endeavor, although exceptional, is unable to be sustained.

This is a prime example of how FAA employees represented by PASS have the knowledge, skills and abilities to perform these functions "in house" rather than through contractors, whose work often extends the time to implement the new equipment and costs the agency more than is required. Staffing the workforce to perform similar installation projects would lead to the upgrade of the NAS in a much more efficient and cost-effective manner.

It is undeniable that the FAA is lacking in sufficient technical staffing. For example, inadequate staffing has resulted in PASS-represented employees being unable to serve on important agency groups and initiatives. To illustrate the issue, a PASS member who had been an integral participant with the Data Communications (DataComm) initiative needed to report back to his facility because of understaffing. DataComm is the FAA's next generation of communications between pilots and air traffic controllers. The PASS member was part of the group tasked with testing and overseeing development of the program. To emphasize his importance to the initiative, the DataComm program office specifically requested he be retained due to his extensive knowledge and experience. His expertise is critical to the implementation across the country; yet, due to insufficient staffing at his facility, he was not released and as of today, has still not been permitted to rejoin this important program.

While PASS is pleased that members of Congress have recognized the important role stakeholders play in modernization of the system, without enough staffing in place, the agency stands to miss out on vital insight and information provided by frontline employees.

PASS views our contract negotiations as an opportunity to make meaningful decisions aimed at recruiting and retaining employees throughout the ATO.

## ***Technical Operations Workforce Plan***

PASS is currently engaged with the FAA on the development of the Technical Operations staffing model (TSM) and, while some progress is on the horizon, much work is still needed. This model only addresses the technical employees in the field who perform preventative maintenance and cannot be relied upon to address staffing for other duties they perform. It also does not reflect the work performed by support personnel who are not directly interfacing with live NAS equipment and systems. Furthermore, the model does not take into account new hire training or fatigue factors. PASS does not believe that the TSM is a reliable tool for determining staffing for this workforce.

PASS is asking that the FAA be directed to establish a Technical Operations Workforce Plan and consult with PASS in its creation and implementation. PASS believes that the abilities and skills that Tech Ops employees provide, if utilized and staffed properly, can provide a distinct improvement in the implementation of new NAS systems. The development of the Technical Operations Workforce Plan should serve as a model for other plans to follow for Mission Support Services and Flight Program Operations. By creating Technical Operations pilot programs to build business cases for insourcing work to the technical workforce (similar to the work performed in Orlando), Congress can point the agency in a direction that will create lasting change for the aviation community and take a step forward in building confidence in the FAA's ability to provide new services and technologies in a fraction of the time it takes today.

## **Aviation Safety**

PASS represents aviation safety inspectors and other employees within AVS. Flight Standards Service (FSS) and Aircraft Certification Service (AIR) aviation safety inspectors are responsible for certification, education, oversight, surveillance and enforcement of the entire aviation system.

PASS is extremely concerned about the agency's inability to effectively and consistently staff the FAA inspector workforce. In fact, according to a 2021 report by the Department of Transportation Inspector General (IG), an alarming 59% and 79% of Certificate Management Office and Flight Standards District Office managers, respectively, said their offices are short-staffed.<sup>1</sup> Among the reasons cited in the IG report for understaffing are many reasons cited by PASS over the years. These include increasing workload, hiring challenges, extended hiring and training periods, and increasing oversight responsibility (including for the evolving UAS segment).

The agency itself has recognized the need to maintain a robust inspector workforce. According to the FAA, "To meet the safety needs of the NAS, AVS will need to recruit, hire, maintain, and retain a workforce with outstanding technical expertise, capabilities, and adaptability. Our efforts must ensure we can hire and retain the right people with the right skills and mindset, engaged at the right time, with systematic coordination between certification and operational suitability."<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> U.S. Department of Transportation Office of Inspector General, *FAA Can Increase Its Inspector Staffing Model's Effectiveness by Implementing System Improvements and Maximizing Its Capabilities*, August 11, 2021, p. 5.

<sup>2</sup> Federal Aviation Administration, *Aviation Safety Workforce Plan 2021-2030*, p. i.

PASS agrees with the FAA and we are eager to assist in the administration of Section 104 of the Aircraft Certification Safety and Accountability Act. This law requires the administrator to collaborate and then bargain with the exclusive bargaining representatives of engineers, safety inspectors, and systems safety specialists regarding the recruitment of employees and for retention incentives for employees. Unfortunately, the agency is not in full compliance with this legal requirement. While a workgroup was created in name only, no demonstrable progress has been achieved.

PASS is currently in contract negotiations with AVS for a new collective bargaining agreement. This should serve as a perfect vehicle to promote recruiting and retention. However, it is regrettable that no meaningful dialogue or progress has been made in bargaining to address the agency's needs for recruiting and retention. To date, it is our impression that AVS is ignoring most of our efforts at the bargaining table tailored toward recruiting and retention. All aviation stakeholders, including those representing airlines, general aviation and pilot certification, depend on the specialized and highly skilled workforce represented by PASS. Groups representing these interests would no doubt find AVS's lack of commitment to recruiting and retention alarming.

### ***Aviation Safety Inspector Staffing Model***

The "staffing model" currently being used by the agency is insufficient to determine the number of aviation safety inspectors needed. As noted by the IG in 2021, due to the model not including relevant inspector staffing data, it "will be limited in its ability to determine whether the model provides reliable information on projected inspector staffing levels."<sup>3</sup> The same report noted that managers are reluctant to use the model.

PASS is asking that the FAA be directed to revise its inspector staffing model in consultation with PASS. PASS is also requesting that the FAA increase the number of safety-critical positions in Flight Standards.

### **Aviation Registry**

The FAA Civil Aviation Registry is the largest in the world, maintaining a repository of over 300,000 aircraft. Its employees examine applications for aircraft registration and accepts or denies registration based on applicability of appropriate federal statutes and regulations, and evidence of ownership.

PASS represents these hardworking employees and strongly supports the FAA's efforts to hire additional employees to fill the empty positions of those who retired. Though there is a plan in place to hire additional employees, it will take six months to train them. Those positions being unfilled contributed to the current backlog, which PASS represented employees are diligently working to clear up. The backlog is currently under 120 days and is on schedule to be under 75 days by the end of April. We are talking with industry about ways to speed up the registry and look forward to further discussions as we work on FAA reauthorization.

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<sup>3</sup> U.S. Department of Transportation Office of Inspector General, *FAA Can Increase Its Inspector Staffing Model's Effectiveness by Implementing System Improvements and Maximizing Its Capabilities*, August 11, 2021, p. 5.

## **Consolidation and Realignment of FAA Facilities**

Section 804 of the FAA Modernization and Reform Act of 2012, as amended by Section 510 of the FAA Reauthorization Act of 2018, establishes a workgroup for making recommendations regarding the consolidation and realignment of services and facilities. While PASS appreciates that members of Congress and the FAA recognize the important roles PASS-represented employees play in making such decisions, it is imperative that organizational changes that impact the NAS are covered under this umbrella. Furthermore, it should be ensured that this process is applied to the merging or consolidating of Technical Operations facilities or the reduction of services to air traffic control that could occur.

Clarity on this matter could have precluded a significant disruption to the facility outage reporting process in the FAA's Operational Control Centers (OCCs) due to the premature closing of the Pacific Operations Control Center (POCC) in San Diego. There are long-term solutions that are still needed to address the matter. FAA is working with PASS to implement solutions. The agency deserves credit for recognizing that the decision was flawed and for collaborating with PASS on some solutions.

PASS continues to provide the FAA with representatives to provide input and recommendations regarding consolidation and realignment. We ask that the agency continue to proceed with caution and consider all factors involved.

## **Conclusion**

The work of the highly trained and skilled employees represented by PASS is essential to protecting aviation safety and fulfilling the agency's mission. PASS recognizes that having the appropriate and skilled workforce in place is essential to maintaining safety of the system. We want to work with the agency to recruit and retain the very best employees. This can be accomplished in many ways including through collective bargaining.

PASS respectfully calls on this committee to consider our areas of concern and recognize the critical contributions made by the employees we represent. As always, we stand ready to work with you to ensure that the United States remains the safest aviation system in the world.