

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

December 3, 2025

Secretary Sean Duffy
U.S. Department of Transportation
1200 New Jersey Avenue SE
Washington, DC 20590

Dear Secretary Duffy:

I write to request that the Trump administration provide every excepted Air Traffic Controller and Technician who worked without on-time pay a \$10,000 award, since these civil servants also performed patriotic work to ensure the safety of the skies during most recent government shutdown.

Excluding 96 percent of the Federal Aviation Administration's (FAA) Air Traffic Controller and Technician workforce from this bonus is unfair, divisive and disrespectful to the over 20,000 dedicated Federal employees who worked under extremely stressful conditions to ensure our Nation Airspace System (NAS) was safe during the 2025 shutdown.

Whether an Air Traffic Controller had a medical emergency or important medical procedure scheduled long before the lapse in appropriations; or had to organize and attend funeral services for a loved one; or had to care for a sick child; or simply had to find time to make ends meet to put food on the table; it is wrong to financially penalize these Federal employees for responsibly managing life events beyond their control while working without pay.

Worst of all, the Trump administration's stinginess in reserving the \$10,000 award to approximately 2.4 percent of the Air Traffic Controller workforce and roughly 6 percent of the FAA Technician workforce creates a perverse and dangerous incentive that threatens to weaken NAS safety during future shutdowns.

If there is another lapse in appropriations during the Trump administration, Air Traffic Controllers will have a financial incentive to avoid using authorized leave—even while suffering from illnesses that degrade controller performance and risk infecting an entire cadre of employees working a shift in a tower, center or Terminal Radar Approach Control facility.

Air Traffic Organization jobs are extremely stressful for good reason: one mistake may be deadly. These dedicated professionals must be at their best when on the job, but your policy encourages Air Traffic Controllers and Technicians to show up regardless of their health. That is incredibly dangerous. Sick leave exists for a reason. Claiming safety is a top priority is mere lip service if Air Traffic Controllers and Technicians fear using authorized leave, even when doing so best serves the safety of the NAS and health of their fellow FAA employees.

Air Traffic Controllers and Technicians may also resent being financially punished for authorized absences, since perfect attendance may not be possible for a wide range of good reasons, including patriotic FAA employees who are members of the U.S. Armed Forces and must fulfill Guard and Reserve commitments.

Using the term President Donald Trump spewed when insulting members of the U.S. Armed Forces, including servicemembers wounded in combat or tortured as prisoners of war,¹ these Air Traffic Controllers and Technicians may fear being “suckers” if they cannot avoid an absence and then fail to use ten thousand dollars’ worth of authorized leave.

While such behavior is unlikely from this dedicated and honorable workforce, the fact remains that such perverse financial incentives should not exist, and will cease to exist, if the Trump administration simply does the right thing by awarding every Air Traffic Controller and Technician who worked without pay during the 2025 shutdown a \$10,000 award. The total cost of this pro-Air Traffic Controller and Technician policy would amount to less than one percent of the FAA’s annual budget—and likely deliver a strong return on investment in the form of improved morale among a beleaguered Air Traffic Organization workforce that has been overworked and understaffed for far too long.

Our Nation cannot build an effective “Brand New Air Traffic Control System” without a robustly staffed and compensated Air Traffic Control workforce. At a time when FAA is operating 3,800 fully certified controllers short of the agency’s staffing target, and Air Traffic Controller morale is rapidly plummeting to new lows, the absolute last thing the Trump administration should be doing is excluding thousands of dedicated patriots who worked without pay during the most recent shutdown from the \$10,000 award.

I do not require a response to this request. I simply want you to act swiftly in issuing \$10,000 awards to the entire dedicated Air Traffic Controller and Technician workforce that patriotically worked without pay during the 2025 government shutdown to ensure the safety of the skies.

Sincerely,



Tammy Duckworth
Ranking Member
Subcommittee on Aviation,
Space and Innovation
Senate Committee on
Commerce, Science and
Transportation

¹ O’Sullivan, Donie. “John Kelly Confirms Trump’s Disparaging Remarks About U.S. Service Members and Veterans.” CNN, October 2, 2023. <https://edition.cnn.com/2023/10/02/politics/john-kelly-donald-trump-us-service-members-veterans/index.html>