

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

September 4, 2026

The Honorable Bryan Bedford
Administrator
Federal Aviation Administration
800 Independence Ave, SW
Washington, DC 20591

Administrator Bedford:

Congress approved a 3.8 percent pay raise for air traffic controllers in the Homeland Security and Further Additional Continuing Appropriations Act, 2026 (Public Law 119-86), which President Donald Trump signed into law on April 30, 2026. In the 127 days since, you have failed to implement the air traffic control (ATC) workforce pay raise Congress authorized and appropriated, and, to date, air traffic controllers, supervisors and managers have only received the governmentwide one percent pay raise. We strongly urge you to recognize and determine that the statutory requirements have been met and immediately implement the remaining 2.8 percent raise.

When you testified at a May 19, 2026, hearing held by the U.S. Senate Committee on Commerce, Science and Transportation's Subcommittee on Aviation, Space and Innovation, you stated, without qualification, that "People are the foundation of the National Airspace System," and acknowledged the urgent need for FAA to "hire the best people, give them the best training and the best tools." We agree with your words but strongly oppose your inaction.

The extremely overworked, understaffed and deeply stressed ATC workforce *is* the foundation of the National Airspace System, and these dedicated, highly skilled civil servants deserve, and should have already received, the full 3.8 percent pay raise that Congress approved months ago.

The statutory conditions Congress established related to the 3.8 percent raise—"improvements in workforce scheduling, staffing utilization, or other operational efficiencies are achieved that contribute to addressing workforce shortfalls and enhancing aviation safety"—were not a high bar. The notion that your agency has failed to reach an agreement with air traffic controllers that they find satisfactory means that what you are requesting must not benefit controllers.

This is not surprising, given just last week you told the Washington Examiner that working with the controllers' union to get "as much utilization out of our workforce as we can" would help "unlock the 2.8%," and that "if we can figure out how we can engage with . . . the union leadership on the basic watch schedule questions. . . there's no reason we can't unlock it this year."¹

Holding air traffic controllers' remaining 2.8 percent pay increase hostage to force a workforce that has operated under mandatory overtime for years to work longer hours is petty, disrespectful and counterproductive. Whether the Trump administration's Brand New Air Traffic Control System succeeds or fails will depend on the morale of the people expected to run it.

Air traffic controllers are operating a strained system, using antiquated technology, while adapting to air traffic control modernization in real time. Controllers work long, high-stress hours and make split-second decisions that keep millions of passengers safe every day. The last thing our National Airspace System needs is a cynical FAA Administrator so hellbent on stretching them thinner that he is willing to withhold their modest 2.8 percent pay raise.

Squeezing more "utilization" out of air traffic controllers who have been understaffed, underpaid and overworked for years will weaken retention and undermine aviation safety. Your own plan says as much: "Chronic use of overtime leads to fatigue, controller burnout and ultimately loss of retention."²

Illinois represents a clear example of the systematic challenges facing air traffic controllers. As of September 20, 2025, the most recent facility data in your plan, Chicago O'Hare tower had 61 certified professional controllers against a target of 88; Chicago TRACON had 76 against a target of 100; Chicago Center had 277 against 290; and Midway tower had 19 against 22. The controllers working in those positions are absorbing the mandatory overtime your plan warns about and have been left waiting months to receive the raise Congress authorized and funded in April.

Secretary of Transportation Sean P. Duffy made it crystal clear that compensation strengthens staffing. Announcing the Department of Transportation's package of controller incentives, he promised it would "supercharge the air traffic controller workforce from both retention and hiring side of the equation."³ How does withholding a pay increase Congress has already funded "supercharge" that workforce or improve retention?

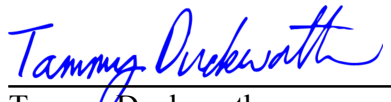
¹ Roth, Samantha-Jo, and Anna Giaritelli. "FAA Leaves Air Traffic Controller Raises in Limbo Amid Mounting Strain on System." *Washington Examiner*, August 27, 2026.

² Federal Aviation Administration. *The Air Traffic Controller Workforce Plan, 2026–2028*. May 15, 2026.

³ U.S. Department of Transportation. "U.S. Transportation Secretary Sean P. Duffy Unveils New Package to Boost Air Traffic Controller Workforce." News release, May 1, 2025. <https://www.faa.gov/newsroom/us-transportationsecretary-sean-p-duffy-unveils-new-package-boost-air-traffic-controller>.

We urge you to expeditiously approve the pay increase that was rightfully earned by our Nation's hardworking air traffic controllers. Air traffic controllers are the foundation of the National Airspace System. These public safety employees operate on the front line to protect American lives and deserve the full pay raise that Congress authorized and appropriated in April 2026. The \$140,000,000 Congress appropriated for it is roughly 1 percent of the \$12.5 billion Congress has already provided for the Brand New Air Traffic Control System. You have moved quickly to obligate money for equipment. Move as quickly for the people who will operate it.

Sincerely,



Tammy Duckworth
United States Senator



Richard J. Durbin
United States Senator