

Air Traffic Control Understaffed & Undertrained: Solving the Airport Labor Crisis Before It's Too Late



Brian J. Alexander
Partner

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By: Brian J. Alexander, Partner

Air Traffic Control Labor Crisis

The FAA recently announced that they reached their goal of hiring 1,500 new Air Traffic Control (ATC) workers this year. However, ATC's and airports in general remain woefully understaffed. According to a June Department of Transportation [report](#), 77% of ATC facilities are understaffed. The shortage is even more profound in some of America's most popular destinations, like New York, whose ATC Facilities are just above half-staff, at a worrying 54%. As a result, the FAA requested a [10 percent reduction](#) in the New York area and Washington DC flights during this year's peak summer travel season.

Limited staff places significant additional strain on ATC workers whose jobs are equally as stressful as they are vital. The shortage also negatively affects consumers by limiting their travel options and increasing fares. There are also safety concerns that require immediate attention, as the understaffed and overburdened workforce struggles to contend with the consistently high travel demand as airlines look to stretch their already [record-breaking profits](#). A few strategic shifts can help ATC's simultaneously bolster their staff and better ensure passenger safety.

Airplane Passenger Safety

In our experience litigating cases on behalf of aviation accident victims, and my own personal experience as a commercially licensed former military pilot, it's abundantly clear that not prioritizing even the most mundane of safety procedures can cause airport accidents and plane crashes. This falls on the FAA and the Department of Transportation to adopt a more sincere approach to actively ensuring airlines abide by their standards, which can prevent disasters like 2018's [Ethiopian Airlines flight 302 crash](#).

The ATC worker shortage is impossible to resolve overnight, and normal business operations cannot continue until safety is guaranteed. If this means longer wait times, more delays or cancellations and fewer flights, *then so be it*. At the same time, hardworking Americans and their families shouldn't pay the price for the industry's shortcomings.

Government Responsibility

The federal government should step in to prevent ticket costs from spiraling out of control and pricing families out of their well-earned vacations. Additionally, the [Biden administration's](#) efforts to increase airfare price transparency and eradicate hidden fees are commendable, and airlines owe it to their customers to act accordingly, and ethically. Increased delays and cancellations due to worker shortages are also not the fault of consumers, and they are entitled to just compensation for cancelled flights or hours spent waiting at the terminal.

Potential Solutions to Air Traffic Controller Shortage

To chip away at the longstanding worker shortage and boost passenger safety, the FAA and the Department of Transportation need a nuanced and expeditious approach to both talent acquisition and worker retention. On the acquisition front, even an [entry level ATC role](#) requires candidates with either a 4-year college degree or 3-years of applicable experience plus an FAA certification. My father was an air traffic controller for over 30 years after serving in the Air Force, without a college degree. In fact, the military has a warrant officer training program that trains non-college candidates to become pilots or for other aircraft technical roles. Some of the very best pilots I flew with during my time in the service came through this program. If a degree wasn't necessary for a successful aviation career then, why should it be now?

Today's shortage proves that lofty requirements for entry-level, lower paying roles will not produce enough applicants to close the gap. Instead, the FAA should reimagine what makes a candidate qualified for an entry-level role, looking at applicants more holistically and prioritizing traits like aptitude and a willingness to learn and start an exciting career. Moreover, ATC positions are very tech-driven roles, which are in line with the high levels of tech literacy among younger Americans.

Apprenticeships are a terrific way to deepen the ATC talent pool, as they offer candidates the chance to "earn while they learn," with the end goal of producing a full-time ATC employee. Apprentices should also be able to earn their FAA certification alongside the hands-on work experience. The successes of the [White House's 2022 Cybersecurity Apprenticeship Sprint](#) is a perfect example, which the government should look to replicate in our airports.

To help retain talent, airports and airlines need to prioritize better pay and better training. Groundcrews, in particular, lack the training necessary to effectively perform their jobs and keep both passengers and [themselves](#) safe. In a recent interview with [The Wall Street Journal](#), Ernest Tanga, a Dulles Airport grounds handler highlighted the dire state of his training and working conditions, saying:

"What we've been taught doesn't match what is being done in the field. You don't want to be blamed for delaying the plane, so you work at a speed that could make you hurt yourself."

With conditions like these, combined with often substandard pay, it wouldn't be surprising if he opted for a career change. Tanga also mentioned that he and his fellow crew members often use outdated equipment and faulty machinery, increasing the risks to their own safety. Clearly, airlines are prioritizing routine business operations over adequate staff training and overall public welfare. This must change.

The first priority for the FAA and the Department of Transportation must be doing everything in their power to enforce proper safety regulations, even if that means continuing to reduce available flights to minimize risks. At the same time, the government needs to act faster, with a refreshed approach, in curbing the ATC worker shortage. Lastly, *all* airport personnel require adequate training and the optimal equipment and technology to ensure they can fulfill their overall duty of fostering safer airports and safer skies.

Simply put, 77% of ATC's being understaffed *is* a significant safety concern in and of itself, and one that necessitates immediate attention.