

Congress of the United States

Washington, DC 20515

March 4, 2025

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

The Honorable Chris Rocheleau
Acting Administrator
Federal Aviation Administration
800 Independence Avenue
Washington, DC 20591

Secretary Duffy and Acting Administrator Rocheleau:

We write with grave concern regarding the safety of the airspace in the New York City metropolitan area. The recent string of tragedies, particularly last month's collision between a passenger plane and a military helicopter at Ronald Reagan National Airport, has demonstrated the complexity of our airspace and heightened fear amongst the traveling public. Further, the Trump Administration's hiring freeze and layoffs at the Federal Aviation Administration ("FAA") have increased uncertainty and anxiety about the safety of air travel. Now more than ever, it is imperative that the FAA prioritize a reexamination of the safety of congested airspaces such as the New York City area, address the air traffic controller shortage nationally and in New York, and act swiftly to implement the FAA Reauthorization Act of 2024.

The New York Metropolitan area is the busiest airspace in the United States, and second busiest in the world behind London. The area is served by three major airports, including Newark Liberty International Airport, John F. Kennedy International Airport, and LaGuardia Airport, as well as numerous general aviation airports and heliports. According to Port Authority data, the region's airports handled over 1.2 million flights in 2024.¹ Adding to the complexity, helicopter flights in the area are seemingly constant. According to data compiled by the New York City Council, a total of 8,848 flights went over New York City land or water in May 2023.² A large portion of these flights are non-essential; an estimated forty-three percent are tours originating from the Downtown Manhattan Heliport, the Kearny Heliport in New Jersey, and Linden Airport in New Jersey.

For years, controllers and pilots have been sounding alarms about a growing number of near misses and runway incursions.³ In 2024, the FAA reported 1,758 runway incursions in the United States.⁴ A New York Times analysis of the Aviation Safety Reporting System, a voluntary and confidential reporting system for safety reports filed by pilots, controllers, and other aviation professionals, found 300 accounts of near collisions involving commercial air craft.⁵ And for years, we have heard from aviation professionals about the ongoing shortage of air traffic controllers. This shortage has created holes in our aviation safety system; many controllers are required to work six days a week and are facing serious levels of fatigue, impacting their ability to do their job correctly. In the New York City metropolitan area, the shortage of controllers is particularly acute because of the added stress of controlling a highly complex and heavily trafficked airspace.

Given the high volume of planes and helicopters navigating our airspace and the controller shortage in our area, we have several critical safety questions:

¹ <https://www.panynj.gov/airports/en/statistics-general-info.html>

² <https://council.nyc.gov/data/helicopter-noise-and-safety/#:~:text=Most%20Frequent%20Flights%20by%20Takeoff,the%20East%2034th%20Street%20Heliport.>

³ <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2023/08/21/business/airline-safety-close-calls.html>

⁴ <https://explore.dot.gov/t/FAA/views/RunwayIncursionTotals/FY2024?%3Aembed=yes&%3Atoolbar=no#2>

⁵ <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2023/08/21/business/airline-safety-close-calls.html>

How many near misses, incidents, and accidents at Newark Liberty, JFK, and LaGuardia involve helicopters?

When was the last time the FAA examined the layout of helipads and flight paths in the New York City area? And does the current configuration account for current traffic levels?

How is the FAA reviewing and further examining the congested airspace in the New York City area in light of recent events?

How is the FAA using its enhanced Air Traffic-Collegiate Training program to prioritize training and hiring air traffic controllers in areas with complex airspaces, such as New York and New Jersey?

How is the FAA addressing growing levels of fatigue amongst air traffic controllers?

Stability and support for safety personnel is critical to keeping our skies safe. While recent layoffs at the FAA have not resulted in the termination of any controllers or “key safety personnel,” the Administration’s ongoing layoffs and intimidation toward federal employees at the FAA is creating an environment of chaos and confusion in a time where safety must be the highest priority and sole focus. While they may not be directly performing safety functions, support staff such as payroll personnel, IT technicians, and office administration staff make sure the FAA can carry out critical programs without disruption. Controllers and other safety personnel already have stressful jobs, and the chaos created by the President’s actions is creating additional undue stress. These controllers need the stability of a smooth operation surrounding them so they can focus on their job. We have several concerns about the current environment at the FAA as it relates to staffing:

Please provide a list of roles that have already been or are expected to be eliminated or experienced force reductions at the FAA.

How is the back and forth impacting morale amongst air traffic controllers and other “key safety personnel?”

What is the FAA doing to ensure that air traffic controllers and key safety personnel are protected?

How is the FAA ensuring the continuity of operations (such as payroll or other administrative functions) at the agency during this time of uncertainty?

How will the FAA continue to prioritize safety in complicated airspaces with ongoing hiring freezes?

While we await the findings of the National Transportation Safety Board’s investigation from last month’s incident, we strongly urge the FAA to take critical steps to ensure the safety of our airspace, including significant limitations to the volume of helicopters operating in the New York City airspace, with attention to communities across the river in New Jersey, and increased hiring of safety personnel. Last year, Congress passed the bipartisan *FAA Reauthorization Act of 2024*, which directed the FAA to hire critical staff in Sections 428, 430, 431, and 437. It is essential that the FAA act swiftly to implement this law.

We applaud all FAA, NTSB, and other workers who show up to work every day with the goal of keeping our skies safe. The traveling public deserve to fly without fear. We urge the FAA to take these fears and concerns seriously and take every possible step to prioritize and improve safety in the airspace.

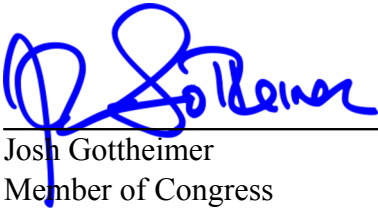
Sincerely,



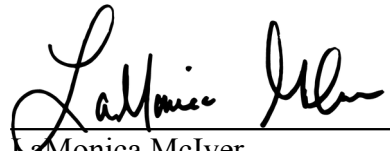
Robert J. Menendez
Member of Congress



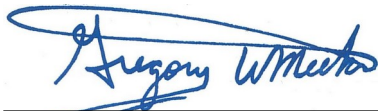
Dan Goldman
Member of Congress



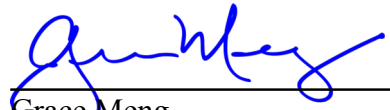
Josh Gottheimer
Member of Congress



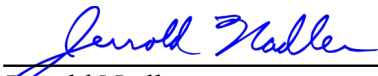
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