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Congress of the United States
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HOUSE SELECT COMMITTEE
ON THE STRATEGIC
COMPETITION BETWEEN THE
UNITED STATES AND THE
CHINESE COMMUNIST PARTY

May 15, 2025

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

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

Dear Secretary Duffy and Acting Administrator Rocheleau:

Over the past two weeks, thousands of my constituents in New Jersey have faced a transportation nightmare – including more than 5,000 flight delays¹ and the cancellation of dozens of round-trip routes² – in the central hub for air transit in our region. Not only are families unable to reach loved ones in the hospital or attend their child’s graduation, but they are increasingly worried about whether it is safe to fly in and out of Newark Liberty International Airport at all.

Since the public was made aware of the April 28th radar and communications blackout at the Philadelphia Terminal Radar Approach Control (TRACON) – which manages Newark’s airspace – the situation at Newark Airport has only worsened. On May 9th, radar screens at the Philadelphia TRACON went dark again for another 90-second period.³ On May 11th, communications and radar displays went down for a third time in less than 14 days, causing the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) to order a 45-minute ground stop at Newark Airport.⁴ On May 12th, meanwhile, staffing shortages at the Philadelphia TRACON were so severe that several hours during the evening had only three air traffic controllers on duty, dramatically lower than the target of 14 controllers for managing the Newark airspace in evening hours.⁵

¹ Wood, Daniel, Shao, Elena, and Levitt, Zach. “See How a Communications Outage Affected Flights at Newark Airport.” *The New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2025/05/08/nyregion/newark-airport-delays.html>.

² Sehmbi, Milan and Niemeyer, Kenneth. “United Airlines says it has ‘no other choice’ but to cancel flights from Newark airport.” *Business Insider*. <https://www.businessinsider.com/united-airlines-flight-cancellations-delays-newark-2025-5>.

³ Oladipo, Doyinsola, Shepardson, David, and Catchpole, Dan. “‘Scopes just went black again’ as Newark air traffic hit by new outage.” *Reuters*. <https://www.reuters.com/world/us/faa-hit-by-new-90-second-communications-outage-newark-air-traffic-2025-05-09/>.

⁴ Muntean, Pete. “Another equipment outage impacts flights at Newark Liberty International Airport.” *CNN*. <https://www.cnn.com/2025/05/11/us/another-equipment-outage-impacts-newark-airport>.

⁵ Chokshi, Niraj, Kelly, Kate, and Steel, Emily. “Newark Airport Had 3 Controllers on Duty When the Goal Is 14.” *The New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/05/12/business/newark-airport-delays-staffing-shortage.html>.

Needless to say, this situation is unacceptable. I have flown in heavily congested airspaces as a helicopter pilot in the U.S. Navy, so I know how dangerous a 90 second radar and communications outage can be for passengers and crew in the air and on the ground. Last week, I called on the Department of Transportation and the FAA to boost staffing and resource capacity immediately for the Philadelphia TRACON that controls Newark's airspace.⁶ Additional personnel are critically needed to make up for the air traffic controllers who were forced to take trauma leave after their experiences on April 28th, and more financial resources and equipment are required to deploy backup communications connections between the Philadelphia TRACON and the Long Island-based equipment still used for Newark air traffic control.

While I welcomed the Administration and FAA's comments about increasing air traffic controller staffing and technology upgrades,⁷ I am disappointed with the lack of urgency and action. Radar and communications blackouts and unprecedented staffing shortages have continued in the week since, prompting concerns about when federal assistance will actually be available for the Philadelphia TRACON and when my constituents can expect relief from this transportation disaster.

On behalf of my New Jersey constituents, I demand answers and action as soon as possible in response to the following questions regarding DOT and FAA's strategy to return the Philadelphia TRACON and Newark Airport airspace to full operations and safety:

1. What are DOT and FAA's immediate plans to increase the number of air traffic controllers at the Philadelphia TRACON, particularly given the current 20% reduction in staffing capacity as a result of controllers taking trauma leave based on the events of April 28th?⁸ What is your deadline for when additional controllers will be able to start work at the Philadelphia TRACON? Is the FAA planning to shift additional air traffic controllers to Philly, and if so, where will these air traffic controllers be moved from? What Newark airspace-specific training will these air traffic controllers need and what is your timeframe for providing it?
2. What are DOT and FAA's immediate plans to add three new, high-bandwidth telecommunications connections between Philadelphia TRACON and the Long Island TRACON, as well as to install a temporary backup STARS radar hub at Philadelphia TRACON? When will this new equipment be operational and ready to manage the Newark airspace?

⁶ <https://x.com/RepSherrill/status/1920509854365384873>.

⁷ Sherman, Ted. "Frightening blackout of radar, radio at Newark airport leads FAA to make urgent changes." *NJ.com* <https://www.nj.com/news/2025/05/frightening-blackout-of-radar-radio-at-newark-airport-prompts-faa-to-make-urgent-changes.html>.

⁸ Muntean, Pete, Skores, Alexandra, and Sanchez, Ray. "Don't expect the problems at Newark Airport to end anytime soon, experts say." *CNN*. <https://www.cnn.com/2025/05/10/us/newark-airport-air-traffic-control-crisis>.

3. Regarding DOT and FAA's longer-term strategy for Newark's airspace, when will a permanent STARS hub be operational at Philadelphia TRACON so that it doesn't need to rely on the Long Island radar feed? Have DOT and FAA evaluated moving Newark airspace control back to the Long Island TRACON?
4. What are DOT and FAA's long-term plans to expand the air traffic controller workforce, including increased funding for workforce development programs, an expansion of the FAA Air Traffic Controller Academy, increased wages and benefits for controllers, and a streamlined hiring process for applicants?
5. As DOT and FAA increase air traffic controller hiring and training, how will you ensure that new controllers are available to work at the Philadelphia TRACON and air traffic control for New Jersey's airspace? New Jersey currently does not have any participating colleges or universities in the Air Traffic Collegiate Training Initiative, which could help develop a New Jersey air traffic controller workforce.⁹ Will DOT and FAA commit to expanding the Collegiate Training Initiative to New Jersey?
6. Last year's bipartisan FAA Reauthorization legislation provided \$70 billion for FAA safety programs (including hiring additional air traffic controllers) and \$20 billion for technology modernization. It also expanded the Aviation Workforce Development Grant Program to boost the number of training positions for air traffic controllers.¹⁰ How are DOT and FAA using these funds to boost the air traffic controller workforce?

It is critical that DOT and FAA act urgently to address this unprecedented situation. Without an immediate boost in air traffic controller staffing levels at the Philadelphia TRACON that manages Newark's airspace, and the creation of multiple redundancies in the Philadelphia TRACON's radar and communications systems, equipment blackouts will undoubtedly continue – putting lives at risk and degrading trust in America's air infrastructure.

Congress stands ready to act in whatever way is needed, along bipartisan lines. It's time to put an end to this crisis.

⁹ "Collegiate Training Initiative (CTI) Schools." *Federal Aviation Administration*. <https://www.faa.gov/jobs/students/schools>.

¹⁰ "Senate Overwhelmingly Approves FAA Reauthorization Act." *U.S. Senate Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation*. <https://www.commerce.senate.gov/2024/5/senate-overwhelmingly-approves-faa-reauthorization-act>.

Sincerely,



Mikie Sherrill
MEMBER OF CONGRESS