

**STATEMENT OF
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**BEFORE THE
HOUSE COMMITTEE ON APPROPRIATIONS
SUBCOMMITTEE ON TRANSPORTATION
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Chairman Rogers, Members of the Subcommittee:

Thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today to discuss funding and safety for the Federal Aviation Administration's (FAA's) Flight Standards division. As a representative of the Professional Airways Systems Specialists (PASS), I welcome this subcommittee's interest in this issue. The Flight Standards workforce enforces civil aviation safety regulations and standards by providing governmental oversight through daily worldwide surveillance of air carrier operations and maintenance. Some 2,800 Aviation Safety Inspectors have the enormous responsibility to provide oversight for more than 7,300 commercial and 11,100 charter aircrafts, more than 184,000 active general aviation aircraft, 4,900 repair stations, more than 600 pilot training schools, 200 airframe and power plant schools, and more than 665,000 active pilots. This monumental task can only be accomplished by ensuring Flight Standards has sufficient numbers of highly trained Inspectors, who are provided the proper funds to accomplish our ultimate task: To ensure the continued safety of the flying public.

I would first like to take a moment to discuss my background. As a retired Air Force Chief Master Sergeant (E-9) with 25 years of aircraft maintenance expertise and as past Director of Maintenance for the United States Air Force Air Demonstration Team, THUNDERBIRDS, I understand the need for aviation safety. For the past four years, I have been an aviation safety Inspector in the Louisville, Ky., Flight Standards District Office (FSDO). I have served as the geographical Air Transportation Oversight System (ATOS) Inspector for Delta Airlines in the Southern Region and as a Principal Maintenance Inspector (PMI) for air carriers (FAR Part 121).

As an Aviation Inspector, I have lived through the FAA's changes in priority — a robust budget following the ValuJet accident and the current bare bones funding. While Congress has appropriated funds to meet the FAA's request for the Flight Standards division, the money is being allocated for other priorities. As a result, the money for Inspectors to complete their jobs has decreased, while aviation demand has increased significantly. According to the FAA's own predictions, the total number of domestic passengers on U.S. carriers is expected to increase from 604.1 million in 2000 to 927.4 million passengers in 2012, a 50 percent increase in about a decade. Furthermore, the nation's fleet of large air transport aircraft with 60 or more seats is expected to grow from 4,417 aircraft in 2000 to 6,313 aircraft in 2012, an annual increase of three percent. This does not even take into consideration the ever growing fleet of regional jets. The cargo fleet of large aircraft is also expected to grow from 1,073 aircraft in 2000 to 1,760 aircraft in 2012.¹

The public and Congress has been focused on solving the flight delay problem, but improper funding and staffing for the Aviation Safety Inspector workforce causes a serious safety situation. While delays are very costly annoyances, an improperly funded Inspector workforce makes it increasingly difficult to ensure safety in the skies. FAA choices have reduced the ranks of the Aviation Safety Inspector to critical levels and stifled professional development in an arena that demands currency training. These once highly trained individuals are being kept behind a desk, instead of in the field, reducing us to mere "paper reviewers."

As funding has dwindled for Inspectors to conduct our jobs, the number of required inspections ("R" items) mandated by Congress, including enroute inspections and maintenance checks, has continued to grow with the increasing number of air agencies and air carriers. More than half of

¹FAA Aerospace Forecasts Fiscal Years 2001-2012, March 2001

the other needed certifications, surveillance, enforcement or compliance oversight is not being accomplished due to reduced funding. This has significantly reduced the margin of safety for the flying public. Funding levels are so anemic that FSDO managers across the country, fearing funding will be exhausted by the latter part of the year, are pushing Inspectors to complete their "R" item inspections in the early part of the year. For instance, a manager at the Louisville FSDO recently sent a memo to Inspectors to "get your R items completed now while you have funding." The manager admitted in the memo that "certification and other work might suffer, but that is the way it has to be." This equates to intense surveillance for the first two quarters with little or no surveillance the last two quarters of the fiscal year. In essence, the American flying public is unknowingly allowing the FAA to make the decision to let Inspectors conduct their jobs via the telephone for half of the year.

Under current budget constraints, only those items designated as "R" items are funded for surveillance and all other needed surveillance is either not performed or performed on a limited basis. For example, Inspectors cannot conduct important surveillance on a daily basis if it requires travel to a site away from the Inspector's home base. In a recent situation, if I could have personally witnessed the final run through for a particular aircraft that had main landing gear problems, the flying public's best interest could have been better served. Without proper travel funds, I was unable to visually inspect the aircraft. While I will review the paperwork, I will have a "nagging doubt" in my mind, because I was not physically in attendance to observe the actual testing while the plane was up on jacks and the gear was run through its paces.

The FAA's lack of priority for the Inspector workforce has caused a reduction in the number of Aviation Safety Inspectors and has significantly impaired and reduced the technical development and qualifications of those who remain. The problem could be partially mitigated by hiring additional Aviation Safety Technicians (AST) to provide support. They could be preparing accident investigation and enforcement reports, answering Freedom of Information Act requests, interfacing with the public and conducting certain inspections and surveillance on their own. Inspectors would then be freed from these tasks to perform more certification and safety inspections in the field and thus spend more time on safety oversight and enforcement of regulations. Inspectors would be able, once again, to uphold our commitment by providing quality feedback to our assigned certificate holders and ensure higher levels of safety in the future. Currently, most FSDO's average one AST per facility, which helps some with the Inspector shortage, but not significantly. However, some FSDO's, such as my facility, do not have any AST's. With a proper amount of AST's at each facility, we Inspectors would not be tied to our desks as much as 70 percent of the time because of a tremendous amount of paperwork.

The current aviation arena has become highly complex and ever changing and requires regular currency training. The evolution of advanced avionics technology (glass cockpits) and highly technical aircraft systems coupled with continued operation of aging aircraft, such as the DC-9, B-727, and the B-737, demands that Inspectors receive regular, structured currency training. Since 1998, training funds for Flight Standards has been significantly reduced to levels where active Inspectors receive little or no technical training. Without regular technical training, Inspectors will not be able to function in this highly complex and ever changing and growing environment. How can an Aviation Safety Inspector, such as myself, be the front line of safety for the American flying public without regular up-to-date currency training?

At the request of Congress, the FAA developed a system-safety approach to oversight of the air carrier industry. The Air Transportation Oversight System (ATOS) was designed to use a proactive method to identify safety trends and determine the root causes of deficiencies or

problems. This was intended to ensure air carriers incorporated the safety attributes required for a properly designed transportation system. The agency has realized air carrier operations are a series of systems that must work together to ensure safe operation and has begun developing a system that examines air carriers in a very systematic manner focusing on surveillance and audits. Basically, ATOS is the segmented re-certification of air carriers on an ongoing basis. The program has the potential to be a good tool to track data when fully developed. For example, the six safety attributes — Responsibility, Authority, Procedures, Controls, Process Management, and Interface — provide a solid foundation to build a reliable safety system.

On the other hand, the current ATOS inspection system has a significant fault, the lack of a framework for oversight of outsourcing by the air carriers. Most American air carriers outsource some or all of their aircraft maintenance, such as de-icing, refueling, ground handling, aircraft cleaning and training. Until proper ATOS tools are developed and implemented to perform adequate outsourcing surveillance, this growing area will not receive the proper oversight it demands.

A fundamental problem with ATOS has been that it has completely replaced the previous method of oversight for the top 10 carriers, despite still being in development. ATOS is not expected to be fully operational in the top 10 carriers until December of this year and the summer of 2002 for the remaining Part 121 air carriers. Another problem has been the decision to create and utilize separate databases for the collection of ATOS and Safety Performance Analysis System (SPAS) data. Prior to ATOS, SPAS had been the lifeblood in the collection and analysis of surveillance data of the top-ten carriers. Now with a separate ATOS database with no tools to analyze the captured data and the SPAS system not receiving inputs on the top ten carriers, we as inspectors have no way to analyze the trend data. Without this tool, inspectors cannot be proactive in safety measures.

Another concern is that several of the needed training programs have not been created. For example, data analysts may receive ATOS data, but are yet unable to fully analyze it for trends or best practices. Further, Inspectors are not fully trained on the use of trend data when conducting surveillance. In the National Transportation Safety Board investigation hearing of the Alaska Airlines crash, Maintenance Inspectors revealed serious deficiencies. The data used to capture this was already indicating problems, but no ATOS data analyst positions had been filled to evaluate the significance of this data, a key position to the success of ATOS. These positions are just now being filled across the nation and minimal training is just now starting.

ATOS was developed and sold to the American flying public and Congress as a cure-all to air carrier accidents, while at the same time providing a conduit for the reduction of the Aviation Safety Inspector workforce. While the ATOS safety system approach has some viable points, overall it has fallen short of the mark. The large number of Safety Attribute Inspections (SAI), 46 per year, is a major drawback of ATOS. An SAI examines the air carriers' overall system to deal with an aspect of Federal Aviation Regulations compliance. With the current staffing situation, the completion of all SAI's in one fiscal year, due to their large numbers and complexity, is impossible. A major air carrier's Certificate Holding District Office (CHDO), such as the one for Delta Airlines, may only be able to complete as few as 10 SAI's per year, leaving the majority untouched.

Due to management's lack of support for ATOS, Cincinnati, Delta's second largest hub, has not had a locally assigned ATOS geographic inspector for more than a year. In fact, while I was assigned as the ATOS inspector for Delta Airlines during the 1998 and 1999 Christmas seasons, local FSDO management removed me from all Delta taskings and reassigned me to perform

surveillance on contract carriers for United Parcel Service (UPS) at its main hub in Louisville, Ky. Essentially, Delta in Cincinnati did not receive oversight/surveillance during these critical two-week peak-flying periods in 1998 and again in 1999. Were the FAA priorities in the right place? ATOS is further complicated by geographical inspectors for each of the top ten carriers being domiciled in different offices throughout the country, and reporting to local managers. However, ATOS surveillance taskings come from each of the certificate holding offices. Therefore, these Inspectors are caught in the difficult situation of pleasing two masters. If ATOS is to remain a viable approach to air carrier oversight, then staffing and funding must be increased to levels to ensure each air carrier receives adequate surveillance year round. Most importantly, FAA management priorities must be directed at improving the margin of safety for the American flying public.

Last year, after nearly four years of pressure to produce results and answer questions in regards to being seriously behind schedule, the FAA chartered the Continuous ATOS Development Core Group (CADCG) to identify major shortcomings and provide approaches to implement recommended solutions. In conjunction with PASS, the collaborative workgroup has determined the program should provide more flexibility for Inspectors, additional data analysts, better data reporting and use, management oversight and an emphasis on cooperation with industry. The Department of Transportation's Inspector General, who said it is the key to making ATOS work, is already touting the benefits of the CADCG. While the group is making progress in pinpointing problems, suggesting solutions and actually testing for feasibility, PASS is concerned that the FAA has never completed a proper needs assessment for ATOS, which may result in the lack of funding to implement the recommendations or to keep the CADCG after this fiscal year. We urge this subcommittee to have the FAA provide a report within the next 90 days with a time-line and future funding requirements for ATOS.

In conclusion, I would ask this subcommittee to send a message to the FAA that safety is its number one priority and ensure the agency does not take needed funds from its Inspector staffing, training and travel budgets. I would also like to say that I can state — and I cannot stress this enough — the aviation community would have suffered without the professionalism, dedication, and tenacity of the Aviation Safety Inspector workforce during this barren budgeting period.