JOHN KERRY
MASSACHUSETTS

COMMITTEES:
COMMERCE, SCIENCE, AND TRANSPORTATION
FINANCE
FOREIGN RELATIONS
SMALL BUSINESS

United States Senate
WASHINGTON, DC 20510–2102

April 22, 2008

Dear Colleague:

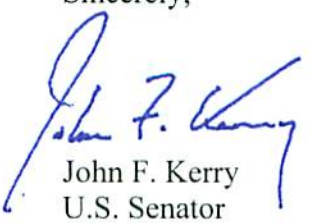
I am writing to request your support on a very important issue that impacts all of us: the safety and efficiency of air travel. I have recently been informed that the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) has fallen below the staffing minimum for its technician workforce. This understaffing has led to increased outages and problems with maintenance and repairs, which has resulted in longer restoration times and increased delays. I believe that we must communicate to Acting FAA Administrator Robert Sturgell that it is critical the FAA do everything within its power to ensure safe and efficient air travel for the American public.

FAA technicians install, maintain, repair and certify the radar, navigation and communication systems making up the air traffic control system. The FAA currently has fewer than 6,100 technicians on staff, the figure previously agreed upon by the agency as being the minimum number needed to safely maintain the system. As a result, many facilities nationwide are understaffed, with some staffed at less than half the level deemed necessary to address the workload at the facility. This not only results in additional overtime hours, but it has forced the FAA to leave watches entirely open

Quite simply, when equipment is out of service or there is a problem with a system, flights are delayed. When there are not enough employees to provide coverage, these delays are extended. The safety of the system is also put at risk if employees are not available to immediately tend to the more serious issues, such as a communications failure resulting in loss of contact between controllers and pilots. Without an adequate technician workforce at the FAA, we can all expect more flight delays, cancellations, and potential safety risks.

I urge you to sign onto the attached letter to Acting Administrator Sturgell requesting that the FAA immediately work to increase technician staffing to at least 6,100. The letter also asks that the FAA provide specific plans for ensuring an adequate level of technician staffing throughout the year. Clearly, air travel is something on which we all rely—please join me in working to keep the aviation system functioning safely. To support this effort, please contact Kelly Aschliman in my office at 202-224-5175 or Kelly_Aschliman@small-bus.senate.gov.

Sincerely,



John F. Kerry
U.S. Senator

email: john_kerry@kerry.senate.gov
www: http://www.senate.gov/~kerry/

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United States Senate
WASHINGTON, DC 20510

The Honorable Bobby Sturgell
Acting Administrator
Federal Aviation Administration
800 Independence Avenue SW
Washington, DC 20591

Dear Acting Administrator Sturgell:

We are writing to express our serious concern over the level of staffing for the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) technical workforce. As you know, maintaining an adequate level of trained FAA technicians is critical to protecting the safety of this country's aviation system. Every day that the FAA operates with an inadequate number of technicians, the flying American public faces greater risk. Yet insufficient staffing continues to be a major problem at numerous facilities throughout the country.

We understand that the FAA now has fewer than 6,100 technicians on staff—the figure previously agreed upon by the agency as being the minimum number needed to safely maintain the system. This understaffing has led not only to increased outages but also delays in repairs, leading to longer restoration times and leaving passengers stranded. In fact, according to the Government Accountability Office (GAO), there has been an increase in unscheduled outages from an average of 21 hours in 2001 to about 40 hours in 2006.

Recent system outages throughout the country highlight these problems. Staffing shortages have left shifts completely uncovered, meaning technicians must commute for up to an hour when a problem occurs, thus vastly increasing the delays. For example, on the morning of March 20, 2008, a massive communications failure occurred at the Boston Air Route Traffic Control Center, which caused over 90 delays throughout the Boston airspace. The restoration time was extended due directly to the fact that there was no certified technician on duty to fix the problem since the midnight shift for the communications unit is no longer being staffed. If a certified technician had been on duty, the restoration time would have been minimal and travelers would have been spared an extensive delay.

With travel numbers on the rise and as the FAA continues in its transition to the Next Generation Air Transportation System, it will be imperative that a sufficient level of technicians is available not only to maintain the legacy systems but also maintain and certify the complex new system. As such, we are requesting that the FAA immediately take steps to increase technician staffing to 6,100, at a minimum. We are also asking that the FAA respond with specific plans for ensuring that there is an adequate level of technician staffing throughout the year to provide both a safe and reliable aviation system.

Thank you, in advance, for your attention to this critical issue.

Sincerely,