

## **Staffing problems for nation's air traffic control system are growing, but state doing better than most**

From a radar post in Farmington, Minn., it was Doug Ratfield's job to make sure airplanes didn't collide as they crisscrossed the sky over northern Iowa en route to their destinations.

Stressful? At times. But Ratfield liked the challenge. Two summers ago, he was training for a more demanding post — watching the skies east of the Twin Cities metro — when he decided instead to retire in August 2006 — the day after his 50th birthday, the soonest he was eligible.

"Things were changing and everything was up in the air," Ratfield said.

Since then, many more have followed.

Today, the Federal Aviation Administration faces an unprecedented retirement bubble that has been worsened by employees like Ratfield. Unhappy with recent pay cuts and rule changes, they are retiring before reaching their mandatory retirement age of 56.

As a result, the traveling public is likely to notice a growing impact, which observers say is showing up in more delays and inconvenience, not necessarily in safety issues. Even so, a Government Accountability Office report last summer notes that because of staffing shortages, some employees may be expected to work more overtime hours, raising fatigue and safety concerns.

The FAA estimates that 70 percent of its workforce — about 15,000 air traffic controllers — will retire between 2008 and 2015. It's a surge that stems from President Reagan's mass firings during a controllers' strike that started in August 1981. The exodus is causing a plunge in experience levels in air traffic control towers in Minnesota and across the nation.

"Unfortunately, it is not clear that, in spite of recent hiring initiatives, the



FAA is ready to cope with this crisis in controller staffing. It also may be underestimating the problem," Rep. Jim Oberstar said at a June hearing on controller staffing.

In addition, some small airport towers already have reduced their hours of operation. One tower in Minnesota has to close for employee bathroom breaks when a co-worker calls in sick. And there are even reports of larger airports briefly suspending service because of lack of staff. When they do, air traffic delays are unavoidable.

### **Solving problem has substantial challenges**

The FAA faces substantial challenges in solving the problem.

The GAO report, for example, said that although the FAA is generally on track with its hiring goals, the shortage of veteran controllers will make it more difficult to train new ones.

The retirement bubble has been on Washington's radar for years. For reasons relating to benefits and training, the FAA requires new hires be younger than 31. So when Reagan fired more than 10,000 striking controllers in 1981, they were replaced by an army of twentysomethings, who are now approaching retirement age.

But the number of air traffic controllers retiring has exceeded the FAA's estimates each of the last two years. An Inspector General report in June said that of 1,876 controllers who retired since 2005, only 37 left because they had reached the mandatory age. The attrition rate was 23 percent higher than projected, and even the FAA acknowledges some of that is because of the labor dispute.

Contract negotiations between the FAA and the National Air Traffic Controllers Association hit an impasse two years ago, as Ratfield was training for his new position. With an agreement out of reach, the administration slashed pay scales by about 30 percent. The rules reset starting pay to about \$30,000 and veteran pay to about \$90,000. (Pay also varies depending on the volume and complexity of the traffic handled.)

Minnesota has eight air traffic controller facilities. The largest is in

Farmington, a center that employs more than 300 controllers who track high-altitude traffic across the entire Upper Midwest. Six airports, including Minneapolis-St. Paul International, have towers that manage takeoffs and landings. Another center at MSP monitors lower-altitude traffic within 30 miles.

The labor problems don't appear to have been as disruptive in Minnesota as they have been in other parts of the country. The tower at MSP was spotlighted in the recent GAO report. By definition, it's overstaffed, with 41 controllers. The FAA's hiring range for the tower is 32 to 39 controllers. Ninety percent of its controllers are fully certified, meaning they can perform any job in the tower.

"We're fortunate we have good people here. Both controllers and management," said Robert Kelzenberg, local NATCA president for the MSP tower. The Twin Cities' relatively low cost of living has probably made the pay cuts easier to absorb here, compared with the coasts, he said. The staff and supervisors still have a decent working relationship. By his count, 11 of 42 controllers at the tower are eligible to retire but have chosen to stay.

That's not to say things aren't changing. A couple of years ago, the average controller at the tower had about 20 years of experience, Kelzenberg said. Now, average experience level has fallen to about 16 years. Not a dramatic shift, but a trend Kelzenberg and others expect to continue for several years and have an uncertain impact on air traffic control.

Falling experience levels aren't unique to the MSP tower. A GAO analysis forecasts the percentage of controllers nationwide with less than five years experience will increase to 60 percent by 2011, up from 25 percent last year. And it'll stay above 50 percent for several years after that, meaning the number of controllers still learning on the job will outnumber those who have mastered their positions.

"It's somewhat akin to a brand-new driver," said Craig Boehne, local NATCA president for the Farmington center. "My son gets his license at 16 and he's a safe driver ... But all of a sudden when he begins driving in a snowstorm or ice storm, or in a crowded traffic situation, or even in

areas they're unfamiliar with, they can be expected to make mistakes."

As the FAA ups its hiring targets, it's also loosening criteria and speeding up training. Last year, it scrapped a requirement that applicants have military controller experience or a specialized training degree. It now considers applicants with any bachelor's degree or three consecutive years of employment history. The length of training has shrunk from three or four years to two or three years. The FAA says that's in part because of more use of simulators.

"The way the FAA is doing it today, they're rushing these young folks through, and they're not getting that experience of working in a training environment," said Tom Buzzard, who oversees the air traffic control program at Minneapolis Community and Technical College. The program is one of about two dozen around the country that trains air traffic controllers. Students train in a facility meant to replicate part of the Farmington control center.

### **Situation adding stress for controllers, public**

Meanwhile, in the nation's towers, controllers are bearing the brunt of the situation.

At Flying Cloud Airport in Eden Prairie, for example, past NATCA local president Brenda Johnson said on two occasions last year the tower closed for short periods so that a lone air traffic controller could take a bathroom break.

"If you have to leave the tower to go to the restroom, then you actually have to close the tower," Johnson said. "We can cover with what we have, but if someone calls in sick, that's it. You're by yourself. If it starts to get busy, you're going to have to send people away."

It's not just small airports where pilots and passengers might feel the staffing pinch.

On a Friday evening in July, all flights into New York's LaGuardia Airport were postponed for more than an hour. While the FAA denies the explanation, the controllers' union said the delay was caused by a lack of air traffic controllers at a facility that, because of the imposed pay and

work rules, had lost 23 fully certified controllers in the past 22 months.

In that time, about 20 controllers, including Ratfield, retired from the Minneapolis Center within days of eligibility, Boehne said.

In Ratfield's case, the controllers' union contract was a few weeks from expiring and rhetoric was turning negative. Management was already making it more difficult for him to get days off when he wanted them. And an anticipated wage freeze gave him less financial incentive to stay.

"I did the number crunching and figured I could swing it," Ratfield said.

If the recent rate of losing controllers continues, it could hinder on-the-job training efforts. The way to slow attrition, Boehne said, is to resolve the labor disagreement.

An FAA spokeswoman, Elizabeth Isham Cory, dismissed concerns about the turnover as exaggerated. She said today's changeover is no more dramatic than replacing the striking workers. That transition, Cory said, did not result in safety problems.

"They all came in at once, too. The guys you're talking to, that's how they started," she said.

Johnson called that a "bean-counter's" answer, one that ignores the real impact of the staffing problems.

"[W]hat about the human toll of working in the middle of the night, working six-day work weeks, overtime, 10-hour days, sitting ... for three or four hours at a time because you're the only person," Johnson said. "It takes a toll on your body, physically. And it takes a toll on the system as a whole. People make mistakes. They might not be deadly mistakes, and thank goodness for that. But why do you want to knowingly put a strain on the system?"