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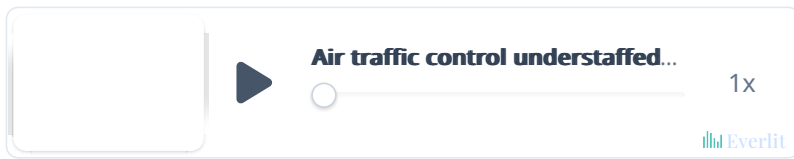
BAY AREA

Air traffic control understaffed in Bay Area, elsewhere as D.C. crash highlights problem

By **Rachel Swan**, Reporter
Feb 4, 2025



San Francisco International Airport's tower, like many others nationwide, is staffed below FAA target levels.
Carlos Avila Gonzalez/The Chronicle



Chronic understaffing of [air traffic control towers](#) may have contributed to last week's deadly crash between a military helicopter and a passenger flight in Washington, D.C. — which underscored a crisis at airports across the country, including in the Bay Area.

Data from the Federal Aviation Administration suggests that controllers in San Francisco, Oakland and San Jose are under similar strain as their counterparts in other cities and states, who work grueling hours and cover the duties of multiple people. At Ronald Reagan Washington National Airport, one such worker was handling two jobs at the time of the stunning collision.

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“It’s been well known in the industry for a long time that this is an issue,” said Max Trescott, a flight instructor and host of the Aviation News Talk Podcast. He pointed out that many air traffic controllers have to work 60-hour weeks, making them more exhausted and undermining their performance.

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FAA's most recent annual report to Congress, called the [Air Traffic Controller Workforce Plan](#), revealed how stark the labor shortage has become. According to the report, San Francisco International Airport had 22 certified air traffic controllers and another six in training as of September 2023 — fewer than the target of 30 set by the FAA and the controllers' union.

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Oakland International Airport appeared more severely understaffed with 19 certified controllers and two in training, a little more than half its target of 35. San Jose Mineta International Airport's tower had 11 certified controllers and two in training, with a target of 15.

Reagan National had 19 certified controllers and another 10 in training, with a target of 30. Air traffic is so heavy at the airport, located a short distance from central Washington, that the FAA limits daily takeoffs and landings. Politicians routinely lobby for flights from the airport to their districts. Despite concerns over safety and delays, the Department of Transportation in December approved five new flights into



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Reagan National, including a San Francisco route operated by United Airlines.

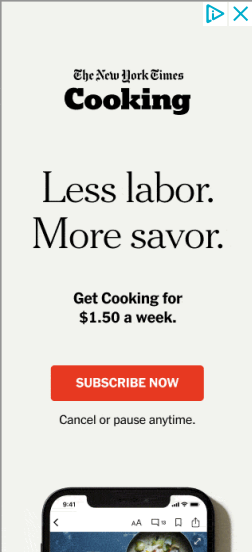
The FAA's targets for staffing include both certified controllers as well as certified controllers in training, who the agency says have previously been certified.

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Spokespeople at all three major Bay Area airports deferred requests for comment to the FAA, which manages control towers at airports throughout the country, in some cases contracting with private companies to staff them. A representative from San Jose Mineta said the airport had not seen any impacts from tower staffing.

In many senses, the situation in Bay Area airport towers reflects a national problem. Managing air traffic is an incredibly difficult job that requires years of training. With a mandatory retirement age of 56, attrition bleeds airports of talent faster than they can hire and recruit.

Since each new hire must pass a battery of tests, ranging from security clearances to psychological evaluations, the process to replace one controller who retires can take up to three years, said Joel Ortiz, western Pacific regional vice president for the National Air Traffic Controllers Association.



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But airports such as San Francisco and Oakland also face unique challenges. These air facilities are so busy and complicated that only a limited pool of controllers are qualified to work there, Ortiz and others said. Those who pass all the tests and training programs — or matriculate from smaller airports — may be inhibited by the high cost of living in the Bay Area.

Wages set by the FAA or its contractors haven't kept pace with other industries. The base pay for a controller at a small airport, such as the Buchanan Field Airport in Concord, is \$68,721, according to NATCA's labor agreement with FAA. Top-tier controllers at a regional center in Fremont, who manage air space at 18,000 feet and above — or cruising altitude for planes that take off from Oakland International or SFO — make \$167,412.

Ross Sagun, an aviation consultant who once served as an air traffic controller at the Buchanan Field Airport, said he's familiar with this calculus. Although San Francisco is among the more prestigious air towers, people who angle for jobs there must grapple with the same problems as other Bay Area workers, Sagun said. Among them: the possibility of a long commute, and the quest to find an affordable place to live, which can dissuade qualified applicants.

"There's a whole plethora of factors coming into play," Sagun said.

Dissatisfaction over wages nearly upended business last week at the San Carlos Airport in Silicon Valley, where air traffic control workers resigned, airport officials said, after the FAA tapped a new contractor to operate the tower. The labor dispute forced a slew of frantic negotiations and prompted a congressman to intervene.

FAA representatives said Friday that they reached an

agreement with the air traffic controllers, though they did not release the terms.

Managing flights and landings at an airport is complex and demanding, but critical to public safety, Sagun said. He and other experts noted all the lives put at risk when lean staffing leads to air traffic controllers being overburdened.

Listening to audio recordings from the tower at Ronald Reagan on the night of Jan. 29, just before a Black Hawk helicopter struck an American Airlines jet, killing 64 people, Sagun expressed sympathy for the sole worker handling air traffic control.

“That controller was very, very busy, very task saturated,” Sagun said. “I’m really hoping the investigators look at that workload issue.”

Reach Rachel Swan: rswan@sfnchronicle.com

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Rachel Swan

REPORTER



Rachel Swan is a breaking news and enterprise reporter. She joined the Chronicle in 2015 after stints at several alt weekly newspapers. Born in Berkeley, she graduated from Cal with a degree in rhetoric and is now raising two daughters in El Cerrito.