# Air traffic controller warns of fatal risk amid Newark flight cuts and system failures



A deeply concerned air traffic controller has raised alarming warnings about the precarious situation at Newark Liberty International Airport, a vital hub that serves more than 1,000 flights daily. The anonymous 39-year-old worker, who resides in Philadelphia, has been thrust into the spotlight following a series of distressing incidents that highlight ongoing operational issues. She describes a nightmarish work environment fraught with technological failures and fatigue, leading her to refuse future flights from the very airport she helps oversee.

On May 9, the controller experienced a catastrophic system blackout, leaving her without crucial data on the positions, speeds, and altitudes of four planes for a harrowing 90 seconds. This incident is one of several that have occurred over the past year, raising fears of imminent disaster. Previous outages on April 28 and May 11, while met with different consequences, only serve to underline the unsafe conditions at Newark. In her written testimony, she expressed her reluctance to board flights departing from Newark, stating, “If Newark’s air traffic control problems don’t get fixed, I believe it’s only a matter of time before we have a fatal crash between two planes.”

Her concerns are echoed by a broader narrative of systemic failures within the U.S. Federal Aviation Administration (FAA). The agency is struggling under a considerable staffing shortfall, operating approximately 3,500 air traffic controllers below its target, a situation exacerbated by old technology and infrastructure. A recent report highlighted that various critical systems still depend on outdated tools like floppy disks, and a modernization initiative that began in 2007 remains unfinished. The FAA has acknowledged that chronic underfunding—affected by partisan politics and budgetary constraints—has left it unable to adequately secure the air traffic control system, leading to the kind of near misses that worry both controllers and aviation experts.

As Newark's air traffic control operations were shifted to a facility in Philadelphia last summer in an attempt to ease congestion along the northeastern corridor, staffing has dwindled. From a complement of 30 controllers, it now hosts just 24, diminishing even further the capacity to manage flights safely. The consequences of this move have manifested in severe communication failures, as controllers are often unable to manage even a dozen aircraft simultaneously. Alarmingly, over a third of Newark's air traffic controllers have taken trauma leave, indicating that the mental toll of working under such intense pressure is becoming unmanageable.

The FAA has announced plans to implement temporary flight reductions at Newark to address these chronic issues. Transportation Secretary Sean Duffy revealed that the airport will be limited to a maximum of 28 arrivals an hour until mid-June, with further restrictions expected through October. This strategic pause aims to improve the situation but casts a shadow over the future of the vital airport. United Airlines, the dominant carrier at Newark, has already begun reducing flights and supports the government's limitations, recognising the urgent need to streamline operations amid the chaos.

This precarious situation not only poses a risk to aviation safety but reflects a deeper issue with the U.S.'s overall air traffic management system—a system that experts argue requires significant reforms to effectively operate in the 21st century. Calls for an independent air traffic control entity have been made, akin to models successfully adopted by other countries, such as Canada, to mitigate conflicts of interest and streamline operational efficiency. Without these vital changes, the controller warns, the alarming incidents at Newark are likely to echo throughout the entire national airspace system.

In her poignant conclusion, she expressed a profound sense of hopelessness, underlining her belief that safety is being sacrificed at the altar of inadequate investment and outdated practices. “I don’t write this because I want our working conditions to improve,” she asserted, “but to raise the alarm. If the authorities don’t fix this mess immediately, people will pay with their lives.”

**Reference Map:**1. [[1]](https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-14733047/air-traffic-controller-names-major-airport-terrified-fly-plane-crash.html?ns_mchannel=rss&ns_campaign=1490&ito=1490)2. [[2]](https://www.reuters.com/world/us/us-set-announce-newark-flight-cuts-reduce-congestion-officials-say-2025-05-20/)3. [[3]](https://www.theatlantic.com/newsletters/archive/2025/05/newark-airport-delays-cancellations/682809/?utm_source=apple_news)4. [[4]](https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2025/05/air-traffic-control-system-faa/682842/?utm_source=apple_news)5. [[5]](https://www.reuters.com/world/us/faa-says-denver-air-traffic-briefly-lost-communications-monday-2025-05-15/)6. [[6]](https://www.reuters.com/business/aerospace-defense/us-faa-plans-new-round-talks-with-airlines-cut-flights-2025-05-15/)7. [[7]](https://www.reuters.com/business/aerospace-defense/faa-holds-meeting-with-us-airlines-cap-newark-flights-2025-05-14/)

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## Bibliography

1. <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-14733047/air-traffic-controller-names-major-airport-terrified-fly-plane-crash.html?ns_mchannel=rss&ns_campaign=1490&ito=1490> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://www.reuters.com/world/us/us-set-announce-newark-flight-cuts-reduce-congestion-officials-say-2025-05-20/> - The U.S. Department of Transportation, led by Secretary Sean Duffy, announced plans for temporary flight reductions at Newark Liberty International Airport to address ongoing congestion issues caused by equipment outages, runway construction, and air traffic control staffing shortages. The Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) will implement a revised flight schedule, reducing the airport’s maximum hourly arrival rate to 28 aircraft until June 15, except Saturdays, and to 34 aircraft until October 25. The FAA held meetings with airlines including United Airlines, Delta, JetBlue, American, Alaska, Spirit, and Allegiant to balance operational needs with the planned cuts. United, the dominant carrier at Newark, has already reduced flights and is advocating for new FAA-imposed limitations. The FAA previously transferred Newark’s airspace control to Philadelphia due to staffing constraints and persistent delays. Nationwide, the FAA is operating with around 3,500 air traffic controllers, below its staffing targets.
3. <https://www.theatlantic.com/newsletters/archive/2025/05/newark-airport-delays-cancellations/682809/?utm_source=apple_news> - The U.S. Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) is currently facing a severe crisis due to years of neglect, underfunding, and outdated technology. Despite a strong safety record over past decades, the national air-travel system is now experiencing near misses, staffing shortages, and technological failures, including recent tracking outages at Newark Airport. Many experts had long warned of these impending issues, but successive administrations failed to act, mistakenly believing that the system's safety record equated to stability. The agency is currently 3,000 air-traffic controllers short of its target, forcing mandatory overtime and relying on aging employees, exacerbating fatigue risks. The FAA's infrastructure still employs archaic tools like floppy disks and copper wires, and a modernization initiative from 2007 remains incomplete. Funding shortfalls have been exacerbated by partisan politics, sequestration, and misaligned appropriations. The problems at the FAA reflect a broader pattern of systemic underinvestment in federal infrastructure and discretionary spending, which has shrunk significantly since the 1960s. This erosion affects other critical sectors, from public health to veterans’ services, revealing the consequences of prolonged government austerity. Without adequate investment, these systems risk becoming ineffective, endangering public safety and governance.
4. <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2025/05/air-traffic-control-system-faa/682842/?utm_source=apple_news> - The article highlights the deep-rooted issues plaguing the U.S. air-traffic control (ATC) system, using recent crises at Newark Liberty and the Reagan National Airport as examples of systemic failures. It reveals strain caused by outdated technology, staffing shortages, and equipment malfunctions, which have led to dangerous situations and nationwide disruptions. Although the Trump administration is building on previous efforts to modernize the Federal Aviation Administration's (FAA) system with a multibillion-dollar investment plan, the article sharply criticizes the failure to reform the flawed governance structure. The FAA continues to operate under antiquated rules and political interference that prevent timely technological advancement. Experts argue that air-traffic control, an operational task, should be separated from the FAA’s regulatory function to avoid conflicts of interest. While countries like Canada have successfully corporatized their ATC systems, U.S. reform efforts in 1995 and 2018 met strong opposition from private aviation interests. Without structural reform, the current investment proposal is unlikely to resolve the core issues. The article calls for transforming the ATC system into an independent, nonprofit entity to better serve public safety and efficiency.
5. <https://www.reuters.com/world/us/faa-says-denver-air-traffic-briefly-lost-communications-monday-2025-05-15/> - On Monday, Denver's Air Route Traffic Control Center experienced a brief two-minute communication outage when both main and backup frequencies failed. Despite the incident, air traffic controllers successfully used an emergency frequency to maintain contact with aircraft, preventing any loss of separation or operational disruptions. The FAA is investigating the cause of the outage, which occurred around 1:50 p.m. Concerns about increasing frequency of such technical failures were raised during a U.S. House oversight hearing, particularly in light of previous telecom outages at the Newark air traffic facility. The FAA has already shifted control of Newark’s airspace to Philadelphia due to staffing issues and congestion. Currently, the FAA is short about 3,500 air traffic controllers. These recurring incidents underscore the outdated state of the nation’s air traffic control infrastructure. In response, U.S. Transportation Secretary Sean Duffy has proposed a multibillion-dollar investment over the next three to four years to modernize the system.
6. <https://www.reuters.com/business/aerospace-defense/us-faa-plans-new-round-talks-with-airlines-cut-flights-2025-05-15/> - The U.S. Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) plans a third day of negotiations with airlines on Friday to temporarily reduce flights at Newark Liberty International Airport due to ongoing delays caused by equipment outages, runway construction, and staffing shortages. The FAA has already held four rounds of individual discussions with air carriers, seeking flight reductions during peak hours. While progress has been made, no final agreement has been reached. The FAA also expects cargo carriers and Canadian airlines to participate and possibly adjust their schedules. The agency warns that the airport cannot currently manage its scheduled operations, leading to significant delays and cancellations. United Airlines, which has already reduced its Newark flights, supports further FAA-imposed limitations. Nationwide, the FAA is short by about 3,500 air traffic controllers, contributing to the issue. Additionally, the FAA recently shifted control of Newark’s airspace to Philadelphia to manage congestion, and some controllers have taken stress leave following a major outage on April 28. Transportation Secretary Sean Duffy emphasized the urgency of addressing the delays, noting that passengers should not face long waits and cancellations.
7. <https://www.reuters.com/business/aerospace-defense/faa-holds-meeting-with-us-airlines-cap-newark-flights-2025-05-14/> - The Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) is convening a two-day meeting with major U.S. airlines to propose a reduction in flights at Newark Liberty International Airport in response to persistent delays and operational issues. Newark, a key hub in the New York metro area, is experiencing significant disruptions due to equipment failures, staffing shortages, and ongoing runway construction, all leading to frequent flight delays and cancellations. The FAA acknowledged that the airport cannot manage its current flight volume and aims to address overscheduling through these proposed cuts. The meeting, not open to the public, will also involve confidential discussions with individual airlines on voluntary flight reductions. United Airlines has already implemented reduced flight schedules and supports government-imposed limitations. These issues underscore broader problems with the aging U.S. air traffic control infrastructure. Transportation Secretary Sean Duffy has proposed billions in funding to modernize the system and highlighted the urgency of addressing staffing shortfalls—Newark’s airspace team is operating with only 24 of the required 38 controllers. Recent telecom outages and stress leaves for air traffic staff further emphasize the system's fragility. The FAA plans to release a transcript of the meeting in the coming weeks.