

Attrition rate of new air-traffic controllers more than doubles

By Alan Levin, USA TODAY

WASHINGTON — New air-traffic controllers are leaving at dramatically higher rates this year, raising concerns about the government's ability to deal with a surge of retirements, a government watchdog group told Congress Wednesday.

The Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) has stepped up hiring in anticipation of the departure of at least 15,000 controllers over the next 10 years. The agency expects to hire 1,877 controllers this year alone.

However, the Government Accountability Office (GAO) testified before the House Aviation Subcommittee that FAA projects 14% of the new hires will leave this fiscal year. That rate is more than double the 6% who washed out in 2006 and well above the 9% who left last year, GAO said.

The higher attrition rate of controllers in training threatens to undermine FAA's attempts to keep up with growing retirements and wastes money, said Gerald Dillingham, GAO's director of aviation issues. The FAA will spend \$78,000 to train each new controller this year.

"We don't have that kind of time or money," Dillingham said. "That is something that needs to be dealt with immediately. It's like pouring water in a bucket with a hole in it."

The FAA is keeping pace with the need for new controllers, even taking into account the departure of new hires, said the FAA's air traffic chief Hank Krakowski. The FAA has aggressively sought new applicants and is hiring more people than it needs to stay ahead of retirements and other controller departures, he said.

Because thousands of controllers were hired within a few years after President Reagan fired the nation's controller workforce in 1981, large numbers are expected to retire in the next decade. The retirements have been happening at a faster rate than the FAA anticipated after the agency imposed a contract on controllers that froze pay and lowered salaries for new hires.

Patrick Forrey, president of the National Air Traffic Controllers Association, told lawmakers that one reason so many controller trainees are leaving the agency is because of the low wages. Forrey charges that there is a shortage of fully trained controllers.

"This country is facing an air-traffic control staffing crisis," Forrey said. "The crisis is real."