

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

March 24, 2011

The Honorable Raymond H. LaHood
Secretary
U.S. Department of Transportation
1200 New Jersey Avenue, S.E.
Washington, D.C. 20590

Dear Secretary LaHood:

I am writing to ask that you take immediate steps to ensure that Newark Airport has the air traffic control staffing levels necessary to keep the traveling public safe.

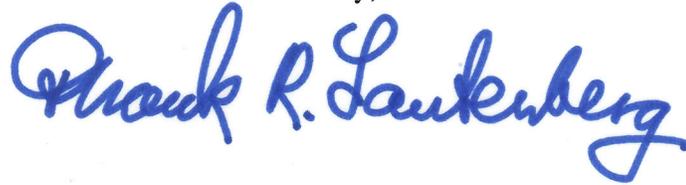
It was alarming to learn that two airplanes carrying a total of 154 passengers were forced to land at Reagan National Airport early Wednesday morning without any assistance from the lone air traffic supervisor on duty at the time and that no front-line controllers, known as certified professional controllers, were working that shift. I have been fighting to properly staff air traffic controllers for more than 20 years. It is unconscionable that we continue to under staff controllers that are critical to the safety of the flying public. Air traffic controllers are essential for the safe operation of our aviation system, and the last thing airline passengers should have to worry about is whether there is anyone working in the air traffic control tower below.

The FAA and air traffic controllers at Newark Liberty Airport have determined that 35-40 certified professional controllers should be on staff to handle the airport's volume. Yet the tower is currently only staffed with 26 certified professional controllers and 8 trainees. This is unacceptable. I have inserted an amendment into the FAA reauthorization bill recently passed by the Senate to require the FAA to design a plan for staffing the Newark Tower with a minimum of 35 controllers. In light of the recent incident at Reagan National Airport, I ask that you work immediately to increase the number of certified professional controllers at Newark Airport and better match its staffing levels with its air traffic volume.

Newark Airport is among the busiest airports in the world, with over 33 million passengers and 400,000 flights each year—and the airspace in the New Jersey/New York region is the most densely congested in the country. Accordingly, I am also writing to seek your assurance that at no time will Newark Airport be operating with only one air traffic controller on duty.

I know you share my commitment to maintaining a safe aviation system for families in New Jersey and across the country. I therefore ask for your prompt attention to this matter and look forward to hearing from you soon.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Frank R. Lautenberg". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large initial "F" and a long, sweeping tail on the "g".