

## Duffy to air traffic controllers: ‘Show up for work’

The Air Current (PASS on page 2 of pdf)  
October 9, 2025

Transportation Secretary Sean Duffy’s messaging for the nation’s air traffic control workforce shifted from exclusively supportive to also frustrated on Wednesday as the U.S. government shutdown now enters its ninth day.

“My message to the air traffic controllers who work for DOT is ‘Show up for work,’” Duffy said during a Wednesday afternoon Fox News appearance. “You’ve got a job to do.”

That’s a departure from Duffy’s comments over the last week, which have solely highlighted the difficulties faced by controllers working during the shutdown without pay; ahead of a press conference on Oct. 6, the Secretary even bought pizza for staff at Newark Liberty’s International Airport. He echoed many of those supportive sentiments Wednesday, but added that controllers are “rebellious” ahead of their first expected partial paycheck next week.

Towers in Burbank, California and Nashville, Tennessee went dark for hours at a time this week as staffing shortages worsened — largely attributed to controllers calling in sick for shifts they are required to work without pay. Duffy said Wednesday 53% of commercial air travel delays across the country over the last few days were attributed to ATC staffing issues, up ten-fold from a normal 5%.

Duffy’s shift in messaging reflects the critical role that controllers play in the U.S. economy and, increasingly, a shutdown mired in political gridlock with no end in sight.

As federal employees, controllers are prohibited from coordinated labor actions or “sick outs,” though the end of a historic 35-day shutdown in 2019 was in part attributed to their absence at some facilities. Duffy’s comments — and the data he shared — seem to indicate rising concern that similar events are beginning to unfold.

Yet others don’t see it that way. “Air traffic controllers don’t start a shutdown, and we don’t end a shutdown,” National Air Traffic Controllers Association President Nick Daniels told CNN on Oct. 8, being careful not to make comments that would in any way suggest an organized job action. “Politicians start a shutdown, and politicians are the only people that can end a shutdown.”

Daniels said the public is getting a “front row seat” to the staffing issues and stressful working conditions that controllers have been forced to contend with for years. In a move to protect the long-term progress the agency is attempting to make on those issues, the FAA for the first time moved to secure stop-gap funding to continue the training of new ATC personnel at its academy in Oklahoma City as the shutdown continues.

It’s a development that reflects decades of dialogue and budgetary maneuvering within the FAA on how to mitigate what former Administrator Mike Whitaker in 2024 called a “roller coaster” of unstable funding.

Daniels on Oct. 5 said those dollars will keep the academy open through nearly to the end of October should a shutdown continue that long. If it continues past that point, the academy — which typically

closes right away when appropriated funds dry up — would shutter without additional funds, crippling the FAA's pipeline of new controllers to the rest of the country.

**While ATC training continues in Oklahoma, *The Air Current* understands that academy training for airway transportation systems specialists — the technicians who maintain much of the national airspace system's aging air traffic equipment — as well as for other support roles has been paused.**

**"That means that the critical knowledge needed to maintain and certify equipment; oversee regulations and perfect cartography to improve aeronautical charts for the NAS will be put on the shelf for another day," said Dave Spero, president of Professional Aviation Safety Specialists, AFL-CIO, which represents about 200 of these employees, in an email to *TAC*.**

ATC hiring and field training for existing controllers in air traffic facilities across the country will continue, both of which are managed by the 25,000-plus exempted agency employees working without pay. About 11,000 staff were furloughed at the beginning of the shutdown.