

## *How Lost Radar and Silent Radios Have Upended Newark Air Travel*

A technical outage in Philadelphia last week terrified air traffic controllers and stranded passengers. As the summer travel season looms, the F.A.A. is racing to address the problems.

Controllers working the airspace around Newark Liberty International Airport temporarily lost radar or radio access to moving aircraft, a system failure that left some controllers working that day with extreme anxiety and requiring a mental health respite. Dakota Santiago for The New York Times



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**By Kate Kelly**

Over the past 18 months, Kate Kelly has interviewed current and former air traffic controllers who have worked at major East Coast airports.

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On a recent afternoon in Philadelphia, an air traffic controller began shouting that he had lost his radar feed for planes flying in and out of Newark Liberty International Airport.

Some of his colleagues still had radar but their radios went dead, prompting frantic calls to their counterparts in New York urging them to keep their planes away from Newark's airspace.

Then, for 30 harrowing seconds until the radios came back, there was nothing more to do but hope — as they had no means of telling pilots how to avoid crashing their planes into one another.

Shortly after that, one controller discovered a trainee, who had been directing Newark traffic under supervision just moments earlier, shaking in the hallway.

That was the chaotic scene on Monday, April 28, according to several people who were present when controllers working the airspace for Newark lost the means to do their jobs.

The failure of the system the controllers rely on left several of those on duty that day with extreme anxiety, requiring a mental health respite that has caused low staffing levels for days since. It has also prompted more than 1,000 flights at one of the nation's busiest airports to be canceled or delayed, leaving some passengers feeling frustrated and abandoned.

Terminal A Departures						Terminal B Departures						Terminal C Departures					
Departing to	Airline	Flight	Sch Time	Gate	Status	Departing to	Airline	Flight	Sch Time	Gate	Status	Departing to	Airline	Flight	Sch Time	Gate	Status
Atlanta		KL 5389	3:29 PM	5	Departed	Addis Ababa		KP 1051	9:45 PM	68	Check-In Open	Aguadilla		AC 3702	7:07 PM	85	
Atlanta		OS 7773	3:58 PM	17	Delayed 7:35 PM	Dubai Int'l		A3 3416	11:55 PM	63		Athens		SN 8818	3:45 PM	110	Departed
Atlanta		VS 4447	5:53 PM	4	Delayed 7:50 PM	Atlanta		F9 4601	10:00 PM	40		Athens		LX 3083	9:00 PM	112	
Atlanta		KL 6623	7:29 PM	6	Delayed 8:07 PM	Charlotte		NK 654	5:38 PM	46	Delayed 7:17 PM	Barcelona		LH 7968	7:20 PM	126	
Atlanta		TP 8520	9:11 PM	22		Frankfurt		UA 8838	6:00 PM	62	Departed	Brussels		OS 7778	6:20 PM	138	Delayed 7:15 PM
Austin		LH 8807	8:38 PM	12	Delayed 10:20 PM	Fort Lauderdale		NK 937	6:00 PM	48	Delayed 8:15 PM	Burlington		CM 1261	9:59 PM	131	
Boston		TP 8516	6:59 PM	21	Delayed 9:00 PM	Fort Lauderdale		NK 446	8:59 PM	46	Delayed 10:21 PM	Cape Town		UA 1122	8:40 PM	71	
Boston		VS 3783	7:35 PM	5	Delayed 8:50 PM	Istanbul		WB 1383	12:30 AM	67		Chicago O'Hare		NZ 2344	6:35 PM	80	Departed
Boston		TP 8514	9:00 PM	27		Krakow		LO 20	8:20 PM	63	Check-In Open	Chicago O'Hare		TP 8482	9:50 PM	81	
Buffalo		OS 7753	10:25 PM	16		Las Vegas		NK 667	5:54 PM	49	Delayed 7:08 PM	Cincinnati		LH 7820	9:17 PM	103	Delayed 11:00 PM
Charleston		LH 7756	9:42 PM	15		Lisbon		B6 6752	10:50 PM	67	Delayed 11:25 PM	Columbus		LH 7362	9:02 PM	101	
Charlotte		BA 5267	7:00 PM	11	Delayed 8:43 PM	London		AY 5488	9:25 PM	53	Delayed 10:00 PM	Delhi		AC 3707	8:55 PM	110	
Charlotte		UA 1183	7:37 PM	26		Los Angeles		TN 2611	7:59 PM	41	Delayed 9:12 PM	Denver		TP 8470	8:07 PM	109	
Chicago O'Hare		BA 4882	7:30 PM	9	Delayed 8:05 PM	Milan/Malpensa		BO 301	8:30 PM	57	Check-In Open	Dubai Int'l		UA 164	9:20 PM	125	
Cleveland Hopkins		LH 7776	8:39 PM	20	Delayed 7:58 PM	Munich		UA 9254	8:30 PM	62	Check-In Open	Dublin		LH 7976	7:40 PM	75	
Dallas/Fort Worth		UA 2266	11:38 AM	21	Delayed 8:00 PM	Myrtle Beach		NK 724	9:00 PM	48		Dublin		LH 7444	11:10 PM	94	
Dallas/Fort Worth		QF 4108	5:59 PM	9	Departed	Nashville		NK 865	10:15 PM	61	Delayed 1:30 AM	Dubrovnik		SN 8889	7:10 PM	128	Delayed 7:45 PM
Dallas/Fort Worth		TP 8522	8:00 PM	17	Delayed 10:15 PM	Oslo		DL 7691	6:50 PM	60	Departed	Edinburgh		LH 7642	8:00 PM	94	
Fort Myers		LH 7792	8:30 PM	29		Paris Orly		BO 101	7:00 PM	51	Final Call	Frankfurt		LH 7602	7:50 PM	123	
Fort Myers		LH 7744	7:15 PM	23		Paris Orly		TX 6721	11:00 PM	54		Geneva		OS 7784	5:25 PM	112	Departed
Fort Lauderdale		LH 7744	7:15 PM	23		Pittsburgh		NK 358	6:43 PM	45	Delayed 7:43 PM	Grand Rapids		LH 7733	9:17 PM	97	Delayed 9:40 PM
Fort Lauderdale		AD 7645	8:00 PM	33		Portland		HA 4897	5:30 PM	43	Departed	Greensboro (NC)		LH 7900	9:51 PM	103	Delayed 11:05 PM
Jacksonville		LH 7840	8:00 PM	18		Porto		B6 6754	10:45 PM	61		Greenville (SC)		LH 7846	6:45 PM	84	Departed
Las Vegas		TP 8540	8:15 PM	15		Reykjavik		FI 622	8:25 PM	61	Check-In Open	Guatemala City		AC 5343	6:37 PM	105	Delayed 7:01 PM
Los Angeles		VA 8148	6:30 PM	28	Departed	San Diego		HA 4898	4:30 PM	41	Delayed 6:58 PM	Houston		TP 8532	8:32 PM	92	
Los Angeles		TP 4547	8:10 PM	34	Delayed 8:25 PM	San Francisco		SQ 1421	3:29 PM	42	Departed	Indianapolis		LH 7786	6:48 PM	97	Delayed 7:05 PM
Miami		LH 7978	8:30 PM	25	Delayed 8:49 PM	San Francisco		HA 4825	7:29 PM	42	Delayed 9:42 PM	Johannesburg		UA 188	9:05 PM	121	
Miami		GO 6034	6:31 PM	11	Departed	Seattle-Tacoma Int'l		TN 2568	4:00 PM	40	Delayed 7:14 PM	Kansas City Int'l		LH 7692	6:30 PM	72	Departed
Minneapolis-St. Paul		TP 8528	6:50 PM	7	Delayed 8:14 PM	Seattle-Tacoma Int'l		TN 2614	6:00 PM	41	Delayed 8:05 PM	Las Vegas		TP 8536	6:40 PM	133	Departed
Minneapolis-St. Paul		TP 8552	7:26 PM	25	Delayed 8:12 PM	Seoul		YP 132	1:00 AM	65		Lisbon		SN 9025	8:35 PM	98	
Norfolk		LH 7731	10:29 PM	17	Delayed 12:30 AM												
International Airport			May 02	7:01 PM		International Airport			May 02	7:01 PM		International Airport			May 02	7:01 PM	

Delayed flights displayed at the Newark airport on Friday. The system failure has prompted hundreds of flights at one of the nation's busiest airports to be canceled or delayed, leaving passengers feeling frustrated and abandoned. Dakota Santiago for The New York Times

The struggles with staffing are particularly notable because the Federal Aviation Administration's decision to relocate some of Newark's air traffic control operations to Philadelphia last summer was intended to increase head count.

The nation's air traffic control system has been plagued by years of dysfunction. The controller ranks were depleted by retirements and a cessation in training during the pandemic. Since then, recruiting and certifying new controllers has been difficult. Existing controllers have been fatigued and even sickened by intense stress and long hours, The New York Times has

reported. Some have avoided seeking medical attention because doing so could jeopardize the health care clearances they need to do the work. Turnover is frequent, especially amid illnesses, family turmoil or safety scares.

The outage and its aftereffects at Newark have prompted public outrage.

Transportation Secretary Sean Duffy, who oversees the F.A.A., has called for "a brand-new air traffic control system." Senator Chuck Schumer of New York, the minority leader, has said the F.A.A. "is really a mess." Scott Kirby, the chief executive of United Airlines, which is Newark's biggest user, said the airport "cannot handle the number of planes that are scheduled to operate there" and blamed controllers who "walked off the job."

But current and former controllers, who requested anonymity for fear of retaliation, and people who witnessed last week's outages said the controllers' time away from their duties was appropriate under the circumstances, given the hardship of working under such duress. They also described the unnerving incident as the culmination of nine months of technical glitches that have eroded the Newark team's confidence in the reliability of the tools that are essential to doing its work.

Last August, in an incident that was later blamed partly on a third-party technician who accidentally cut a data feed from a remote location, a controller lost radar for about 90 seconds, according to people who were there. A week later, radar scopes froze several times, according to F.A.A. activity logs that were reviewed by The Times. Then, about eight months later, the April 28 outages, which lawmakers have blamed on a "fried" copper wire, occurred.

"From what we can gather right now, the communication lines that feed the Newark sector, which resides in Philadelphia, are failing," Dave Spero, the president of Professional Aviation Safety Specialists, a union that represents airway transportation systems technicians, said in an interview. He said contractors, not the F.A.A. itself, were responsible for those lines.

The F.A.A. said it was working closely with facility managers and vendors to address telecommunication issues across the national airspace system, particularly in the Northeast. Mr. Duffy said the F.A.A. had "slowed down the system" to ensure traveler safety at Newark.



Workers in the United Airlines station operations center at Newark's airport last year. The chief executive of the airline said the airport "cannot handle the number of planes that are scheduled to operate there."  
Angus Mordant/Bloomberg

The F.A.A. has acknowledged that some Newark controllers have taken time off to deal with the stress of the recent outages. On Tuesday, the agency said it had slowed arrivals and departures at Newark, in part because of staffing shortages. It added that it was "taking immediate steps to improve the reliability of operations" at the airport, including installing new, high-bandwidth data connections, deploying a backup system to Philadelphia and increasing staffing among the Newark controller ranks.

Mr. Duffy is expected on Thursday to announce additional details of a planned air traffic control overhaul, which he has been working on since a midair collision near Ronald Reagan National Airport outside Washington this year killed 67 people.

The F.A.A. said in a statement that it had 22 certified Newark controllers in Philadelphia and almost as many in training.

But that is not the whole picture. Because of mental health leave and other personnel matters, only 16 certified controllers are currently available to call on each day, according to people familiar with the situation, and more than double that number would typically be needed to cover all the shifts.

Aviation experts say — and the F.A.A. acknowledges — that there are no quick fixes to controller shortages.

Being a controller for a busy airspace like Newark's typically requires years of nuts-and-bolts training and experience in other busy airspaces close to major cities.

Even a veteran controller who joined the Newark team from a hub like Atlanta or San Diego would need up to a year of specialized training to become familiar with the nuances of Newark's traffic — which typically involves 80 or more departures and landings in a given hour — according to controllers with knowledge of that airspace. In addition to that, Newark controllers handle the traffic at smaller regional airports, including one in Teterboro, N.J.

Transportation Secretary Sean Duffy, who oversees the F.A.A., has called for “a brand-new air traffic control system.” Eric Lee/The New York Times

Controllers working the Newark airspace from Philadelphia were supposed to be the solution, rather than the problem. The F.A.A. reasoned that the relatively low cost of living near Philadelphia would attract more workers who wanted to purchase homes or raise families, and that the Philadelphia International Airport control tower where they would be stationed was newly renovated.

The move was fraught from its inception. Some controllers resisted leaving their perch in Westbury, N.Y., where they had worked alongside colleagues handling flights in and out of LaGuardia Airport and Kennedy International Airport for years or even decades.

Some controllers who argued to the F.A.A. that the relocation would place undue hardship on their families were permitted to stay in Westbury. Others opted to take their chances in Philadelphia, collecting a \$100,000 incentive payment for doing so. Their workstations in the new building, which the F.A.A. had spent \$36 million to modernize, were fitted with real-time tracking technology.

They reported to their new posts on July 28.



The controllers for Newark initially worked on a reduced flight schedule to smooth out any kinks. But by mid-August, with summer travel robust, standard traffic levels in and out of Newark had resumed, and flights were proceeding normally.

The F.A.A. said on Tuesday that it had slowed arrivals and departures out of Newark, in part because of staffing shortages. Spencer Platt/Getty Images

Then on Aug. 27, a Newark controller in Philadelphia lost radar imagery for roughly a minute and a half after the technician's mistake, according to two people who were in the control hub that day.

The controller was monitoring half a dozen planes at the moment the radar vanished, including two United Airlines jets, one of the people recalled. With no visual imagery to guide him, he tried to direct the pilots from memory, according to three people with knowledge of the incident.

"Attention all aircraft. Radar contact is lost. Radar contact is lost," the controller said, according to an audio recording of the event.

By the time radar imagery returned, said two people with knowledge of the incident, one of the flights was well into LaGuardia's airspace and was flying over the Hudson River.

The controller, who had decades of experience, retired within days of the incident, said the three people with knowledge of the matter.

The trouble in Philadelphia persisted. Less than a week later, Labor Day travelers flying in and out of Newark faced delays and a ground stop — a temporary halt to takeoffs and landings — because of unrelated radar equipment problems, according to the F.A.A. The agency blamed "data transmission issues" in the regional system.

Those were an outgrowth of the way the F.A.A. handled the transfer of Newark flight data to Philadelphia when it moved the controllers, according to government and union officials at the time. Rather than feeding flight data that was generated at Newark straight to Philadelphia, the F.A.A. instead routed the data initially to Westbury, and then to Philadelphia from there, those officials said.

That meant that the data had to travel further and was also vulnerable to being overloaded at times by other hubs in the system that were experiencing glitches, said Mr. Spero, the president of the safety specialists' union.

"It caused what they call a cascade failure with target freezing," Mr. Spero said. He was referring to the dots that represent moving aircraft on radar screens that, according to F.A.A. logs of that day, froze in several places, prompting an alert.

The F.A.A. said in a statement that it was establishing a communication system that will not require the Philadelphia facility to rely on a feed from New York.

Controllers said last fall that while data and capacity hitches had not been their chief objection to relocating, they had long been a source of anxiety. It has only gotten worse as the isolated glitches have come to seem like more of a trend, said the people who witnessed the recent events in Philadelphia.

One controller who was there on April 28 made it to his car before breaking into tears, one of those people said. He has taken time off, this person added, and will need to be cleared by a mental health professional before he can return.

Mark Walker contributed reporting.

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