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FILE PHOTO

Fifteen of Honolulu's 83 air traffic controllers were eligible to retire in February, a number that is expected to rise annually.

Staffing crisis looms for isle air traffic control

By Mary Vorsino
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Eighteen percent of Honolulu air traffic controllers are eligible to retire, part of a nationwide "looming crisis" in manpower that threatens to disrupt travel by increasing delays and decreasing flights, say industry officials.

The problem is compounded here because it takes three to five years to train controllers for the Honolulu air traffic control center, which is already shorthanded.

"Lives are at stake, literally," said Mark Sherry, an alternate regional vice president for the National Air Traffic Controllers Association's Western Pacific region. "What we'd end up having to do is slow down the airplanes. Delays will go way up."

Controllers are eligible for early retirement after 25 years of service or if they are 50 and have worked as a controller for 20 years.

At a glance

>> Most of the nation's air traffic controllers are employed by the Federal Aviation Administration at one of the nation's 360 airport control centers.

>> During the next decade, nearly half of the agency's 15,000 air traffic controllers will retire.

>> Fifteen of Honolulu's 83 air traffic controllers were eligible to retire in February, a number that is expected to rise annually.

>> In 2002 the median annual salary for controllers was

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They are required, though, to retire at 56.

Fifteen of Honolulu's 83 air traffic controllers were eligible to retire in February, Sherry said. And at least three of the 12 to 15 controllers employed at airports on Maui and the Big Island are also eligible, he said.

Controller retirements are a problem nationally, too. By 2010 nearly half of the nation's 15,000 air traffic controllers will have retired, according to union and government statistics.

If nothing is done, airports across the country will start seeing the effects of short-staffed control centers in the next four to five years, Sherry said.

"It certainly is a problem right now," he said. "We do have some facilities that are very short-staffed, and the looming crisis is that the retirements are coming up very quickly."

The retirement wave is due in large part to the 1981 strike of air traffic controllers, to which the government responded by firing 11,000 controllers and replacing them with managers or nonstriking controllers. Most of today's controllers were hired in bulk during the 1980s or 1990s, Sherry said.

He said staffing shortages at Honolulu's control center could decrease the number of airplanes given clearance to land and depart hourly at Honolulu Airport, and also "reduce the margin of safety."

"There could be impacts on safety," he said, "and we don't want to see that."

Johnny Lake, an air traffic controller and National Air Traffic Controllers Association spokesman in Honolulu, said his facility is already understaffed by six controllers. He said controllers have had to make up the difference by taking less leave and bigger airspace watch areas.

"It starts to concern us as we see gray hairs all around us and we don't seem to see any youngsters," he said. "I've been here 15 years. When I got in, I was probably the median age of the facility. Fifteen years later, I'm still the median age."

The Federal Aviation Administration is working on a plan to meet the staffing demands of the air traffic controllers' retirement wave, and is expected to address Congress with a possible solution in December. The work is in response to a General Accounting Office report issued last month that urges the FAA to re-evaluate its methods of controller training and recruitment.

FAA spokesman Greg Martin said officials are working now to determine how many controllers should be brought in to combat a possible shortage.

"It won't be a simple matter of hiring one controller for each controller who retires," said FAA spokesman Greg Martin. "A one-size-fits-all approach to air traffic control simply doesn't apply because different parts of the country have different" requirements.

The controllers union, though, argues that at least 1,000 controllers need to be hired every year until 2007.

Boosting the nation's civilian air traffic controller population by 1,000 would cost the FAA an additional \$40 million to \$60 million annually, Sherry said. But, he said, the administration is due some catch-up.

"The trick here is that the agency is already late on hiring to replace those people (who

\$131,610, while others made less than \$46,410.

>> Controllers are eligible for early retirement after 25 years of service or if they are 50 and have worked as a controller for 20 years. They are required to retire at 56.

>> Most air traffic controllers go through three to five years of training. There are about 13 FAA-approved controller schools in the nation, none of which are located in the islands.

Source: U.S Bureau of Labor
Statistics and National Air Traffic
Controllers Association

retired)," he said.

In fiscal 2003 and 2004, the FAA has hired only one air traffic controller. In fiscal 2002 the administration brought in about 300 controllers.

No new hires are planned for fiscal 2005, and the earliest the FAA could get funding for more controllers would be in the federal fiscal 2006 budget.

"We don't see anybody coming behind us," Lake said, adding that any new faces at the Honolulu facility are midcareer transfers from elsewhere in the nation. "I don't see anybody coming up behind me to replace me."

Lake said there are no air traffic controller certification programs in the islands. In 2001 there were only 13 controller schools in the nation, according to the GAO.

Martin said FAA is surveying the 360 air traffic control centers around the country to find out how many employees they have who are eligible to retire, and how many they will need in the next decade. He could not say whether the Honolulu center has been reviewed yet.

National Air Traffic Controllers Association
www.natca.org

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