

# LaGuardia disaster exposes dangerous airport conditions as Trump deploys ICE agents to terminals

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Federal investigators revealed Tuesday that the deadly runway collision at New York's LaGuardia Airport unfolded amid a breakdown in staffing, communications and safety technology, with only two controllers in the tower cab overnight and a fire rescue truck on the runway that lacked a transponder and could not be reliably tracked by the airport's surface detection system.

The March 22 collision between Air Canada Express Flight AC8646 and a Port Authority fire truck killed the two pilots and injured dozens more. Mackenzie Gunther and Antoine Forrest, two young Air Canada Express pilots from Canada, were killed Sunday night when their CRJ-900 arriving from Montreal slammed into a Port Authority fire truck on Runway 4 at New York's LaGuardia Airport. About 40 passengers and crew members, along with two people aboard the truck, were taken to hospitals after the collision, which occurred shortly before midnight.

Far from an inexplicable tragedy, testimony from National Transportation Safety Board Chair Jennifer Homendy on Tuesday pointed to a chain of systemic failures: the truck was cleared to cross an active runway only seconds before touchdown, the tower was staffed overnight by just two controllers performing multiple duties, and the vehicle itself lacked a transponder, preventing the airport's surface detection system from reliably tracking it or issuing an alert.

At a press conference led by Homendy, investigators laid out the final minutes before the crash using the cockpit voice recorder. According to NTSB aviation accident investigator Doug Brazy, the sequence showed the aircraft checking in with LaGuardia tower, being cleared to land on Runway 4, and descending normally through its final approach as the crew completed the landing checklist.

The most damning portion of the timeline came in the last half-minute. Twenty-five seconds before impact, Truck 1 requested permission to cross Runway 4 at taxiway Delta. Twenty seconds before impact, the tower cleared Truck 1 and accompanying vehicles to cross. Seventeen seconds

before impact, Truck 1 read back that clearance.

Then, with the jet only seconds from touchdown, the tower belatedly told the vehicle to stop. About eight seconds before the recording ended, there was a sound consistent with the landing gear touching down. The collision followed almost immediately. As Homendy emphasized, the truck was responding to another emergency involving a United Airlines flight that had reported fumes or smoke in the cabin after two aborted takeoffs.

Homendy also disclosed that there were only two controllers in the tower cab during the midnight shift, which she said is standard operating procedure. The local controller had signed on at 10:45 p.m. and was scheduled to sign off at 6:45 a.m. The controller in charge had signed on at 10:30 p.m. and was scheduled to end at 6:30 a.m., while also handling the duties of the clearance-delivery position. Investigators said it remained unclear who, exactly, was performing the duties of the ground controller, which include managing aircraft and vehicle movements on the taxiways. Homendy said investigators have conflicting information in the logs and are trying to rectify those inconsistencies.

The NTSB chair cautioned against simply "pointing fingers at controllers," while at the same time underscoring that "heavy workload involvement" is a serious issue in the investigation. She said the board is examining what happened around the shift change and why the controller remained on duty for several minutes after the crash, when ordinarily that person would have been relieved. Investigators have said there is no indication at this stage that fatigue was a factor, but Homendy noted that previous investigations have repeatedly identified fatigue as a concern in overnight control operations. The NTSB has long warned about fatigue risks in transportation and has issued multiple recommendations on the subject over decades.

Another critical issue was the fire truck's lack of a transponder. Homendy said the vehicle did not appear on

LaGuardia's ASDE-X surface detection system in a way that allowed controllers to confidently track it. According to the NTSB, the system failed to generate an alert because of the close proximity of vehicles "merging and unmerging" near the runway, preventing it from creating a reliable track. On radar, Homendy said, investigators could see only indistinct "blobs," and the system did not show any vehicle clearly moving in front of the arriving aircraft. Although runway status lights appear to have been functioning, the surveillance system did not provide the warning that might have prevented disaster. Homendy said requiring transponders on such vehicles is not currently an NTSB recommendation, but added that she personally supports the measure.

Homendy summed up the basic character of the investigation by noting, "We rarely, if ever, investigate a major accident where it was one failure." That assessment points to more than an isolated mistake. At one of the country's busiest airports, handling roughly 900 flights a day, aircraft were being guided by a tower in which two overnight controllers were covering multiple jobs, while emergency vehicles moved near an active runway without transponders and without a system capable of clearly tracking them.

The warning signs had already been there. As CNN reported, citing a review of NASA's Aviation Safety Reporting System, pilots had repeatedly flagged LaGuardia over the past two years for "miscommunication, air traffic control missteps and other hazards." In one report last summer, a pilot pleaded, "Please do something," warning that controllers were being pushed to the limit and that the pace of operations at LaGuardia was beginning to resemble conditions at Reagan National before the January 2025 Potomac collision.

Other reports described near misses on the ground, including one in July in which a plane was cleared to cross a runway while another aircraft was landing and "ground control issued a stop command just in time." Only months ago, two Delta regional jets collided on a LaGuardia taxiway. Sunday's crash was not a bolt from the blue. It was the outcome of conditions that pilots had already identified as dangerous.

The conditions described by the NTSB are not an accident in the broader social sense. They are the product of a system in which safety is subordinated to cost-cutting, understaffing and technological patchwork. There is no technical reason why a major airport in 2026 should rely on overnight staffing levels that leave controllers juggling multiple positions, or why emergency vehicles operating near active runways should lack equipment needed for full visibility. Nor is there any rational basis for workers responsible for

hundreds of lives to labor under conditions where fatigue has repeatedly emerged as a known danger. Under capitalism, however, every necessary safeguard is treated as an expense to be minimized. The result is a chain of preventable hazards that only becomes visible after lives have already been lost.

Even as investigators revealed that overworked controllers, inadequate safety equipment and confused ground operations lay behind the disaster, President Donald Trump sought to turn the airport crisis into a pretext for expanding the visible presence of the immigration police state. In posts Tuesday morning, Trump blamed "the Democrats for the Airport's mess," praised "our great ICE Patriots," and threatened to "call up the National Guard for more help."

The posts make clear that the deployment of armed ICE agents to major airports is not a temporary improvisation but part of a broader effort to normalize the presence of repressive state forces in everyday public life, intimidate immigrants and accustom the population to extraordinary police measures ahead of the 2026 midterm elections. The agents' presence has already generated fear and anger among travelers, while TSA workers, unlike ICE, continue to endure the shutdown without pay.

What emerged from Homendy's press conference was not simply individual "error," but the social logic of capitalism at work. At one of the busiest airports in the United States, handling roughly 900 flights a day, controllers were performing multiple jobs overnight, safety systems could not reliably track emergency vehicles on the runway, and known dangers had accumulated through repeated near misses and ignored warnings. Now, instead of addressing understaffing, fatigue, training and technology, the administration is using the broader airport crisis to flood terminals with immigration Gestapo and threaten National Guard deployment.



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