FAA moves to fire 2 LaGuardia controllers before fatal runway-collision investigation is complete

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The Federal Aviation Administration is moving to fire two air traffic controllers who allegedly left New York's LaGuardia Airport about an hour before the end of their shifts on March 22, shortly before an Air Canada Express jet collided with a fire truck on the runway, killing both pilots and injuring 41 people. This is a naked scapegoating attempt aimed at shifting responsibility onto individual workers for a disaster rooted in chronic understaffing, exhausting schedules and management's own decisions.

Air Canada Express Flight 8646, operated by Jazz Aviation with 72 passengers and four crew members aboard, struck a Port Authority fire truck after touching down on Runway 4. The truck was responding to an emergency involving a United Airlines aircraft and had been cleared to cross the runway at Taxiway Delta. The landing aircraft had also been cleared. Seconds before the collision the controller transmitted, "Stop, stop, stop, stop, stop, Truck One, stop, stop, stop!"

Traffic that night was unusually heavy. Seventy commercial flights took off or landed between 10 p.m. and 11:37 p.m., compared with an average of 53 and only 31 scheduled, making it the third-busiest March Sunday since 2022. Five of six controllers interviewed by Reuters said additional staff would normally be brought in or held over under such conditions.

Only two controllers were in the tower cab. Investigators are examining whether one was working both local and ground control, positions separating arriving and departing aircraft from traffic on the airport surface. "That wasn't good to watch," a pilot said afterward. "Yeah, I know," the controller replied. "I tried to reach out to them. We were dealing with an emergency earlier. I messed up." The pilot answered, "Nah, man. You did the best you could."

The two controllers targeted by the FAA were reportedly scheduled until 11:45 p.m. but are alleged to have departed at about 10:45 p.m. But such departures, known as "early shoves," have long occurred where traffic permits and supervisors or controllers-in-charge authorize or tolerate them. Nothing made public rules out the possibility that this is what occurred. The roster, break schedule, supervisory assignments and approvals have not been released.

Whether the controllers left early and under what authority, their alleged departure cannot be separated from why only two controllers remained during a traffic surge, why positions may have been combined, whether management sought additional coverage, and how the crossing and landing clearances were issued.

The National Transportation Safety Board has not determined the cause of the collision or found that the controllers' absence contributed to it. The administration nevertheless speaks as though culpability were settled. "We will not tolerate fraud," Transportation Secretary Sean Duffy said, "and we are taking appropriate action to hold folks accountable... when a small percentage of individuals take advantage of the American taxpayer, unfairly add additional work to their fellow controllers, and impact the airspace—we have no choice but to act."

Duffy is announcing punishment before investigators have established what role, if any, the two controllers played in the collision. The move is meant to shift the blame onto two controllers for conditions created by the FAA over decades.

The rapid tempo of dangerous incidents throughout the National Airspace System underscores the systemic character of the crisis. The following ATC-related safety events occurred in the past two months alone:

•**August 14, Phoenix:** Two American Airlines aircraft

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simultaneously used the call sign Flight 2482, one arriving and one departing. A controller detected the duplication, improvised separate identifiers and maintained separation.

• **August 6, Minneapolis:** An equipment outage at the Minneapolis Air Route Traffic Control Center disrupted ATC services across roughly 330,000 square miles, forcing diversions, ground stops and delays for about two hours.

• **August 4, Washington:** Marine One and an Envoy Air jet lost required separation near Reagan National after a communications failure and failure to stop commercial departures. Preliminary data put them 0.94 miles apart laterally and 700 feet vertically.

• **July 27, Atlanta:** Two Delta jets received collision warnings when one was executing a go-around as another departed. A controller issued an immediate turn and climb instruction.

• **June 26, Miami:** An American Airlines A319 rejected takeoff after a business jet entered the runway without authorization, bringing the aircraft within roughly one-third of a mile.

• **June 20, Boston:** A Delta A319 went around as an American Airlines 737 departed from an intersecting runway. The aircraft came within roughly 325 to 350 feet.

The immediate causes differ, and in several cases controllers helped avert catastrophe. Their concentration nevertheless shows the system's narrow safety margins. An FAA dashboard updated August 11 recorded 1,102 runway incursions in fiscal year 2026 to date, more than three per day, compared with 1,197 a year earlier.

The FAA's latest cause breakdown, for 2023, attributed 60 percent to pilot deviations, 20 percent to controller actions or inaction and 20 percent to vehicles or pedestrians. But severe Category A and B incursions increased 44 percent in 2025 even as the total fell about 1 percent. The latest widely reported controller-specific figure counted 503 "significant" ATC lapses in fiscal year 2023, up 65 percent while traffic rose only about 4 percent. These categories are distinct, but all show a system under acute strain.

The destruction of PATCO was the historical turning point. In 1981 Reagan fired more than 11,000 striking controllers, wiping out an experienced workforce and inaugurating recurring staffing and training crises over generations. Today only about 11,000 fully certified controllers cover more than 300 facilities, with roughly 4,000 people in training. Certification commonly takes more than two years while retirements continually drain experienced personnel. In May the FAA lowered its official target for certified controllers from 14,633 to 12,563, reducing the shortage on paper by more than 2,000 positions instead of filling it.

From 2013 through 2023 the FAA hired only about two-thirds of the number called for by its own model. Overtime per controller rose more than 300 percent, averaging 167 hours in 2024, when the workforce logged 2.2 million overtime hours at a cost of about $200 million. Mandatory overtime and six-day weeks are routine. The FAA now proposes to raise daily time actively working traffic from about four hours to more than five, intensifying fatigue and the danger created by combined positions and shortened recovery time.

The National Air Traffic Controllers Association (NATCA), founded after the destruction of PATCO, has publicized staffing and equipment shortages and lobbied Congress and the FAA for hiring and modernization. But on the threatened firings it says only that it is "actively discussing these allegations with FAA leadership" in what it calls the "appropriate forum." It has not mobilized controllers against the scapegoating. Private discussions with the agency conducting the campaign leave the targeted workers isolated and channel opposition back into appeals to management and Congress, which under both parties created the present crisis.

Controllers should demand an immediate halt to the proceedings. Every facility must be staffed to safe levels, with adequate breaks, limits on overtime and no routine combining of safety-critical positions during heavy traffic.

This fight requires rank-and-file committees independent of the NATCA bureaucracy, linked with pilots, mechanics, flight attendants, airport workers and the broader working class. They must fight for thousands of additional controllers, modern equipment and worker control over staffing and safety. The campaign to make two workers answer for a crisis created over decades must be defeated.

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