In 1982, the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) began a pilot program to contract for air traffic control services at five “level 1” (low-activity) control towers. Currently, the FAA Contract Tower (FCT) Program consists of 256 air traffic towers—operated by three contractors and the Air National Guard—in 46 States.

Our office has performed several audits evaluating the FCT Program since 1998. Most recently, in 2020, we reported that between fiscal years 2015 and 2018, contract towers on average used fewer resources—or had lower controller staffing levels—per aircraft handled and had a lower number and rate of safety incidents than similar FAA towers.¹

The U.S. Senate Committee on Appropriations directed our office to examine FAA’s policies, standards, methods, and practices for establishing staffing levels at contract towers, assess the FCT Program’s ability to adjust to significant air traffic growth and local requirements, and examine FAA’s relationship and coordination with its contractors.² As such, our objective is to assess FAA’s approach for establishing and modifying air traffic controller staffing levels at contract towers.

We plan to begin the audit next month and will contact your audit liaison to schedule an entrance conference. We will conduct our work at FAA Headquarters, FAA Regional Service Centers, and contract towers, and will meet with the three

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contractors that operate the towers. If you have any questions, please contact me at (202) 366-0500 or Nelda Smith, Program Director, at (202) 366-2140.

cc: DOT Audit Liaison, M-1
    FAA Audit Liaison, AAE-100