The Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) employs about 13,800 air traffic controllers in more than 300 facilities across the United States. Ensuring adequate staffing and training for controllers is essential to maintain the safety of the National Airspace System (NAS), especially at the Nation’s critical facilities—i.e., those that are the busiest, most complex, and most critical to NAS operations based on the number of airlines and flights serving them, such as New York, Chicago, or Atlanta.

In 2016, we reported that FAA faced challenges with ensuring it has enough fully trained controllers at its critical facilities and had not yet established an effective process for balancing training requirements with pending retirements. Similarly, in 2012, we reported that FAA needed to conduct enhanced oversight of its staffing and training to maintain continuity of air traffic operations at these facilities.

As it addresses these challenges, FAA now also has to respond to the Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic. Since the pandemic started, controllers at numerous air traffic control facilities have tested positive for COVID-19, leading to partial shutdowns of towers and radar control facilities and impacting staffing and training operations. Moreover, with veteran controllers leaving for various reasons, including retirements, and increased training demands, FAA faces the

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1 FAA Continues To Face Challenges In Ensuring Enough Fully Trained Controllers At Critical Facilities (OIG Report No. AV2016014), January 11, 2016. OIG reports are available on our website at http://www.oig.dot.gov/.

challenge of ensuring it has the required number of controllers at the air traffic facilities that are critical to the NAS.

We are initiating this audit given the importance of maintaining the safety of the NAS, as well as the potential impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the staffing and training of air traffic controllers. Our audit objectives are to (1) assess FAA’s efforts to ensure that critical air traffic control facilities have an adequate number of controllers and (2) identify the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on FAA’s controller training program.

We plan to begin the audit later this month and will contact your audit liaison to schedule an entrance conference. We will conduct our work at FAA Headquarters and reach out to selected critical facilities. If you have any questions, please contact me at (202) 366-0500 or Marshall Jackson, Program Director, at (202) 366-4274.

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