

U.S. Rep. John J. Duncan Jr.: FAA gaffes show need for revamp

Michael Collins, Knoxville News Sentinel | April 21, 2011

WASHINGTON - A series of embarrassing blunders involving an air traffic controller at McGhee Tyson Airport and other controllers across the country may have put the Federal Aviation Administration on the spot, but U.S. Rep. John J. Duncan Jr. thinks the revelations point to a much bigger problem.

Federal personnel policies make it extremely difficult to fire problem employees, the Knoxville Republican said. They desperately need to be changed, he thinks.

"There are too many protections for most federal workers," Duncan said. "It's too hard to get rid of lazy, incompetent people."

The chairman of a U.S. House subcommittee that oversees the federal work force already has announced plans to overhaul the federal civil service system this year, and Duncan said reports of air traffic controllers falling asleep on the job could give some momentum to that effort.

Other complaints have arisen amid the controversy, including concerns that the FAA fails to keep local airport authorities adequately informed when a problem arises with a controller.

On Wednesday, the chairman of the Metropolitan Knoxville Airport Authority said he hopes for better communication with the federal agency. Kirk Huddleston said that while the FAA may see sleeping controllers as an internal personnel matter, it's the airport authority that has overall responsibility for operations at McGhee Tyson.

Air traffic controllers are among the highest-paid workers in the federal government. In Tennessee, their annual salary averages \$116,000, according to the FAA. In some cases, experienced controllers earn more than \$200,000 a year.

"The taxpayers should not be paying \$100,000-plus salaries for people to go and sleep on the job when they're not working long hours in the first place," said Duncan, who sits on a House aviation subcommittee.

Air traffic controllers defend their high salaries and generous benefits by pointing out that the job carries a lot of stress, "but almost every job is a high-stress job," Duncan said.

The FAA has been re-evaluating its scheduling practices for air traffic controllers and announced this week it is adding an hour to the minimum time controllers must be off between shifts in light of reports that at least five controllers have been caught recently sleeping on the job.

In Knoxville, the FAA is taking steps to fire controller Jonathan Keith Poindexter after he allegedly spent five hours sleeping during his midnight shift at McGhee Tyson on Feb. 19. Poindexter's on-the-job snoozing forced the only other controller on duty to juggle the radar and tower positions and land seven aircraft during the shift.

FAA spokeswoman Kathleen Bergen declined to say whether the other controller tried to wake Poindexter. "Because this matter still is pending, we cannot disclose additional details," she said.

Bergen did confirm that the snoozing controller has been suspended with pay from "operational duties," meaning he isn't working in the control tower pending resolution of his case.

Huddleston wondered why Poindexter still had his job in February, considering that he'd been prosecuted in 2010 for an incident in which he pulled a gun on a girlfriend in Alcoa during an argument.

"My question is when the guy had his incident (with the law), why did they hire him back? Is that the kind of guy you want landing airplanes?" Huddleston said.

In Ohio this week, an air traffic controller was suspended for watching a DVD movie while on duty. Also, the National Transportation Safety Board said Wednesday it is investigating possible error by controllers after a plane carrying First Lady Michelle Obama was forced to abort its landing after coming too close to a C-17 cargo plane. The close call happened as the planes were approaching Andrews Air Force Base in Maryland.

Duncan said the personnel issues involving the air traffic controllers underscore serious problems with the federal civil service system.

Critics argue the system is antiquated and places too much burden on managers to make their case when trying to fire or discipline problem employees. "There's all sorts of appeals they can go through, and they can drag it out for a real long time," Duncan said.

For instance, in general, whenever FAA management takes disciplinary action against a worker, the employee is notified in writing and has the opportunity to respond before a final determination is made, Bergen said.

Employees may appeal unfavorable decisions to the Merit Systems Protection Board or they may file a grievance. The controllers union, the National Air Traffic Controllers Association, is available to assist them during the disciplinary process.

U.S. Rep. Dennis Ross, a Florida Republican who chairs the House Subcommittee on the Federal Workforce, has said in newspaper interviews that disciplinary procedures are one area he intends to examine when he begins working to overhaul the federal civil service system this year.

A spokesman for the air traffic controller's union did not return calls for comment. But John Gage, national president of the American Federation of Government Employees, the largest federal employees union, said it is a myth that federal employees can't be disciplined or fired.

"Thousands of federal employees are fired every year for poor performance or misconduct, and many others quit after performance or discipline problems are brought to light," Gage said.

Michael Collins may be reached at 202-408-2711.

Copied 10/7/2012 from:

<http://www.knoxnews.com/news/2011/apr/21/john-duncan-faa-gaffes-show-need-for-revamp/>
(Highlights, footnotes and minor edits may have been added, but only to add clarification)