



Northeast's Busiest Airports Operate with Aviation Forecast Office Closures Due to NWS Vacancies

(January 10, 2017) The National Weather Service aviation offices that provide forecasts for New York, Philadelphia, and Washington D.C.'s airspace were closed during busy daytime travel over the holidays, jeopardizing the safety of the flying public. The closures continue as four aviation forecast offices continue to juggle shifts, doubling the size of airspace they watch as they substitute for each other due to severe staffing shortages.

NWS Center Weather Service Units (CWSU) are aviation forecast offices embedded at each of the FAA's Air Route Traffic Control Centers. NWS aviation meteorologists at the CWSUs prepare specialized airspace forecasts, watches, and warnings for air traffic and safety. They communicate these forecasts directly to FAA air traffic control managers. These face-to-face, on-the-spot briefings are vital to helping air traffic controllers safely and efficiently route traffic, especially during thunderstorms, snow, and conditions that cause icing on aircrafts' wings.

Four aviation meteorologists are assigned to each CWSU, to cover operations 16 hours a day, 365 days a year. Due to the a staffing shortage and NWS hiring slowdown, only two of these four "Emergency Essential" aviation meteorologist positions are filled at the New York CWSU. As a result of this 50 percent vacancy rate, the New York CWSU closed the entire unit from 6 a.m. to 10 p.m. on December 25, 2016; the unit was also closed for four to eight hour shifts on Dec. 23, 24, and the first week of January. During this time, the aviation meteorologist responsible for covering Washington DC and surrounding areas had to double his watch to include forecasting the airspace for both New York south to the Caribbean over the Atlantic. The Washington D.C. CWSU is dealing with its own staffing shortage, operating with only three aviation meteorologists. Shortages in both New York and Washington D. C. means air traffic controllers are also relying on the Cleveland CWSU to expand their forecasts to cover for shifts that are closed along the east coast.

The airports served by the New York CWSU and Washington D.C. CWSU include: John F. Kennedy International, LaGuardia, Long Island MacArthur, Newark Liberty International, Philadelphia International, Washington Dulles International, Ronald Reagan National, Baltimore Washington International, and smaller airports. The CWSUs also provide aviation forecasts for military airspace. Aviation meteorologist are so vital to public safety that the positions are "Emergency Essential" and must show up for work in an emergency situation, severe weather or a work furlough.

"The NWS is putting the flying public at risk by keeping these positions vacant," said NWSEO Executive Vice President Bill Hopkins. "They are asking one person to take on the responsibility for the airspace of two major regions of the country. The degradation of service is threatening the flying public. There are no plans for an emergency. Who are they going to call for back-up when they've made operating on back-up the norm?"

Air traffic controllers in New York share these concerns. In November, a New York air traffic control manager wrote to Kevin Johnson, the FAA's Chief Meteorologist in Washington DC:

“Having less than 4 mets at ZNY CWSU to me is not acceptable but going to 2 is out of the question and unsafe. With the vast amount of airspace we operate in, including a large portion of the Atlantic Ocean we need that weather information from the mets. This is a safety matter to me...”

The National Weather Service is experiencing a staffing crisis nationwide with a 16 percent vacancy rate. In 2016, a very successful program designed to increase air travel safety and efficiency was eliminated in Chicago due to staffing shortages; [the Government Accountability Office is investigating the NWS staffing levels at the request of Congress.](#)

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