Statement of J. Randolph (Randy) Babbitt
Senior Vice President, Labor Relations
Southwest Airlines Co.
Before the Subcommittee on Aviation
Committee on Transportation & Infrastructure
U.S. House of Representatives
June 15, 2016

Chairman LoBiondo, Mr. Larsen, and Members of the Aviation Subcommittee:

Thank you for the opportunity to appear before this subcommittee today to discuss issues related to Air Traffic Controller hiring, staffing and training. Today, I come before this body wearing four "hats," which I have collected over my nearly five decades working in the aviation industry. Those "hats" are as a current airline executive, a former Administrator of the FAA, a former airline union president, and as a former commercial airline pilot.

Because of my current and prior "lives" in aviation, I believe I offer a unique perspective on these important issues. I am pleased the Subcommittee asked me to testify today and honored to join this distinguished panel. For your information, I have attached my biography to printed copies of this testimony and ask that it be included in the hearing record.

First and foremost, I am here today as a senior executive for Southwest Airlines. Southwest is the Nation's largest air carrier in terms of domestic passengers, serving roughly 150 million Customers annually with a combination of low fares and no annoying fees, friendly Customer Service delivered by outstanding People, and a safe and reliable operation.

Today, Southwest has a fleet of over 700 Boeing 737 aircraft, operating nearly 4,000 flights per day to 87 U.S. destinations and11 international destinations – and every one of those flights are operated in controlled airspace. So, to say the least, we are very dependent on – and very appreciative of – a robust and highly-skilled Air Traffic Controller workforce.

In my prior roles as FAA Administrator and as a commercial airline pilot, I was proud to interact daily with the professional men and women of U.S. Air Traffic Controller workforce. Their dedication to aviation safety, operational efficiency and professional integrity is truly remarkable. We all must have confidence in the ATC system. And, during my 50 years flying, I have never lost that confidence – in large measure due to the skill and professionalism of our Nation's Controllers.

Now, with that said, my confidence in the ATC system itself is a little shaky these days. Although I have no concern from a safety perspective – the safety of the ATC system is never in doubt – I do question the reliability of the overall ATC system from an operational and customer service perspective.

The U.S. aviation system is both labor and capital-intensive. And, like other modes of transportation and other sectors of the aviation industry, prolonged underfunding of staffing needs and system improvements will take its toll as it has with the DC Metro System and the TSA security apparatus.

All of this produces concern about whether the current ATC system can move forward and be modernized in its present form. Eventually, without major structural changes and greater funding and staffing certainty, serious inconveniences to aircraft operators and ultimately to our Customers and your constituents will result.

Specifically, in addition to delivering beneficial NextGen technologies more quickly and in order to avoid the crisis confronting TSA or the DC Metro, the federal government needs do more to address the supply of certified Controllers, as well as providing the required training to fully utilize NextGen capabilities that are available today – principally, Performance Based Navigation – and other capabilities expected to be rolled out in the near future – for example, Data Communications in the en route environment.

Aviation traffic is forecasted to grow steadily, while certified Controller staffing levels continue to decline with no relief in sight. This seems to be particularly problematic at critical ATC facilities, which require the most experienced Controllers to manage complex operations skillfully and effectively. As the Nation's largest domestic airline, this concerns us and challenges our promise to our Customers to provide friendly, reliable and on-time service.

Due to our concerns with the future capabilities of the ATC system and the current pace of progress with regards to the NextGen program, Southwest has joined most of the airline community and several aviation unions – including NATCA – to support the significant structural, financing and procurement reforms contained in the House version of the FAA Reauthorization Act (H.R. 4441).

The U.S. ATC system is a 24/7 operation that contributes $1.5 trillion annually to the Nation's gross domestic product and generates over 12 million jobs. We believe such an important economic engine will struggle to meet future demand under the current system, challenged by the fits and starts of the annual appropriations process and the threat of sequestration or government shutdown. We applaud the Committee for looking at these important issues and at least recognizing that the status quo is not acceptable. Hopefully, a bipartisan solution to these issues can be achieved sooner rather than later.

On behalf of Southwest Airlines, thank you for this opportunity to testify. I will be happy to answer any questions.