Air-traffic controllers miss their first paycheck. The shutdown's effects on airports is getting worse.

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By Claudia Assis

Shutdown-related 'staffing triggers' are driving some air-travel delays and cancellations

An airplane taking off from Ronald Reagan Washington National Airport earlier this month.

The U.S. government shutdown is nearing its first full month with Washington still gridlocked. This week also marks the first missed paycheck for the nation's air-traffic controllers, while Transportation Security Administration employees, including airport screeners, are also going without pay.

That increases the risk of further flight cancellations mere weeks away from the air-travel Super Bowl: Thanksgiving week.

"If we are still going [with the shutdown] by Thanksgiving, it'll be a disaster in the air" in terms of delays, said Ernest Arvai, president of AirInsight Group, who noted that Thanksgiving also usually brings weather delays on top of the crowds.

Vice President JD Vance echoed that sentiment later on Thursday after a meeting with U.S. airline executives.

By Thanksgiving, air-traffic controllers and other essential government workers would be missing up to four paychecks, which could lead to missed work and "massive delays," Vance said.

United Airlines Holdings Inc. (UAL) and Delta Air Lines Inc. (DAL) issued statements later Thursday urging lawmakers to end the shutdown.

Only 2% of flights have been delayed so far because of the air-traffic-control shortages, so controllers have done "a great job," United's Chief Executive Scott Kirby said.

"But it's putting stress on people. It's not fair to those people. It's also putting stress on the economy," he said. "We put the whole economy at risk."

Roughly 14,000 air-traffic controllers and some 60,000 TSA agents are considered essential workers, and are thus expected to continue working during the shutdown.

They may increasingly be calling out of work, however. "Staffing triggers," indicating a shortage of controllers, have been driving some flight cancellations and delays in recent days, in addition to the more usual halts triggered by bad weather or construction at major airports this week. On Thursday evening, long delays due to staffing shortages were reported at the Orlando, Fla., Reagan National airports and others along the East Coast.

Staffing triggers are expected to increase throughout the rest of the week as paychecks remain held up, Jefferies analyst Sheila Kahyaoglu said.

The National Air Traffic Controllers Association, on its website, urged air-traffic controllers to "rise to the occasion."

"We cannot stress enough that it is essential to avoid any actions that could reflect poorly on you, our union or our professions," the union said on its webpage.

AirInsight's Arvai said air-traffic controllers have done a great public service during the shutdown. "But all it takes is a couple of guys being out" for delays, as the system is already operating under long-running shortages, he noted.

It takes three to five years of experience for an air-traffic controller to work in high-density areas. Only about a third of the people vying to become a controller complete training, and of those, "the stress gets to about half" after their first few months on the job, Arvai said.

"To get one controller, you probably have to train five. It's not a job for everybody, let me put it that way," he said.

In several interviews this week, Transportation Secretary Sean Duffy warned of even more air-travel disruption as the shutdown grinds on. Duffy said at an event that "this year, on average, the delays that are associated with staffing triggers, with air-traffic controllers, is 5%," but that they were 44% on Sunday and 24% on Monday.

So far in 2025, which is considered a normal year, around 20% of flights have been delayed for a variety of reasons, aviation analytics company Cirium said.

Major travel groups have yet to issue their predictions for Thanksgiving-week travel, which broke records last year. Travel and leisure group AAA said last year that nearly 6 million people were expected to fly during the holiday week, or 2% more than the previous year. Executives at major U.S. airlines recently expressed optimism about holiday travel.

If travelers feel the shutdown pain at airports, airlines feel it on their operations beyond the cancellations and delays. Among personnel furloughed are aviation-safety professionals, including aircraft-certification engineers and aerospace engineers.

The shutdown also threatens to halt the progress U.S. airlines have seen in getting planes in and out of airports on time. Before the shutdown, U.S. delays and cancellations were trending down this year.

The shutdown started Oct. 1 mostly because President Donald Trump and Republicans are in a standoff with Democratic lawmakers over including an extension for Obamacare subsidies in a bill that funds the federal government through Nov. 21.

Despite several well-publicized problems in the spring, including a deadly air crash in Washington, D.C., and long delays at New Jersey's Newark Liberty International Airport, 2025 had been essentially tied with last year as far as the number of flights canceled or delayed for more than 15 minutes, the industry's on-time marker.

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Robert Schroeder in Washington contributed.

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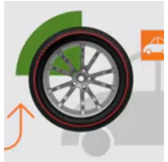

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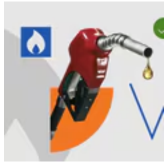

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