



**U.S. House of Representatives**  
**Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure**  
**Washington, DC 20515**

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**Chairman**

**James L. Oberstar**  
**Ranking Democratic Member**

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August 30, 2006

Mr. Todd Zinser  
Acting Inspector General  
U.S. Department of Transportation  
Washington, D.C. 20590

Dear Mr. Zinser:

There have been some disturbing reports in the wake of the August 27, 2006 Comair Flight 5191 crash in Lexington, Kentucky. This terrible tragedy resulted in the deaths of 49 people, and the media has reported, and the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) has confirmed, that the Blue Grass Airport air traffic control tower was understaffed at the time of the accident.

Air traffic controllers are an important component to the safe operation of our nation's air traffic system, and their effectiveness requires proper staffing levels at each facility. It was reported that in November 2005, an overloaded controller at the Raleigh, North Carolina airport directed two planes too close to one another, and this close call prompted the FAA to issue "guidance" forbidding air traffic controllers with certain responsibilities from working alone.

An FAA statement of August 29, 2006, states that some air traffic control towers which control surface traffic also "separate airborne aircraft using radar equipment. FAA guidance is to provide individual controllers for the radar and control tower functions." It is not clear whether this guidance is written or verbal. The statement further indicates that this guidance was not followed at the Lexington tower where the manager decided to have "one controller handle both functions during the overnight shift." While the National Transportation Safety Board has yet to issue a full report of its findings regarding the causes of the Comair Flight 5191 accident, it is not too early to investigate how widely the staffing practice at the Blue Grass Airport is practiced at other critical air traffic control facilities across the nation.

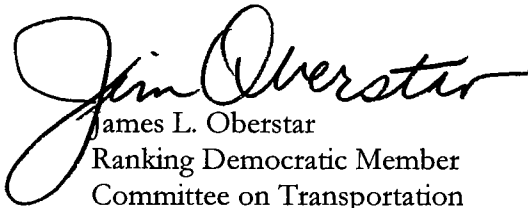
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Therefore, we would like your office to review the November 2005 FAA guidance, and determine the extent to which the towers covered by the guidance are complying with it. Was the "guidance" written or verbal? If verbal, how was it communicated? How many towers were not in compliance at the time of the Comair accident, and how many were not in compliance at some point between the dates of the issuance of the guidance and the accident? What steps did FAA take to review staffing at its facilities to determine whether they were complying with the guidance, and to require compliance if they were not?

If, in the course of your work, you identify other relevant issues that you believe the Congress should be aware of, we would like you to include them in your analysis.

Should you have any questions or need any additional information, please contact Stacie Soumbeniotis, Democratic Staff Director, or John Drake, Democratic Professional Staff, of the Subcommittee on Aviation at (202) 225-9161.

Sincerely,

  
James L. Oberstar  
Ranking Democratic Member  
Committee on Transportation  
and Infrastructure

  
Jerry F. Costello  
Ranking Democratic Member  
Subcommittee on Aviation