

FAA acknowledges it must do better after deadly DC air collision

BY JOSH FUNK
ASSOCIATED PRESS

The head of the Federal Aviation Administration told Congress during a hearing Thursday about a midair collision over Washington, D.C., that killed 67 people that the agency must do more to ensure flying remains safe.

The FAA's artificial intelligence-led review aimed at identifying safety threats at other airports with similar helicopter-airplane congestion should be finished in a couple weeks, said Chris Rocheleau, the agency's acting administrator.

During the hearing, the head of the National Transportation Safety Board and members of Congress again questioned how the FAA hadn't noticed an alarming number of close calls near Ronald Reagan National Airport and addressed the problem before the January collision between an Army helicopter and a jetliner. The collision over the Potomac River was the nation's deadliest plane crash since November 2001.

"We have to do better," Rocheleau said. "We have to identify trends, we have to get smarter about how we use data, and when we put corrective actions in place, we must execute them."

HOW THE FAA IS USING AI

The FAA is using AI to dig into the millions of reports it collects to assess other places with busy helicopter traffic including: Boston, New York, Baltimore-Washington, Detroit, Chicago, Dallas, Houston, Los Angeles and along the Gulf Coast. Rocheleau promised to take immediate action if risks are found.

Investigators have highlighted 85 close calls around Reagan airport in the three years before the crash that should have signaled a growing safety problem. Rocheleau told the aviation subcommittee of the Committee on Commerce, Science and Transportation that every close call is investigated and all the data was reviewed before, but this alarming trend was missed.

NTSB Chairwoman Jennifer Homendy said there clearly was an issue with



Jennifer Homendy, chair of the National Transportation Safety Board, stands next to a map showing flight restrictions as the Senate Transportation Subcommittee holds a hearing to examine the preliminary report by the National Transportation Safety Board on the Jan. 29 midair collision of an Army Black Hawk helicopter and an American Airlines regional jet Thursday on Capitol Hill.

identifying trends in the data the FAA collects.

Dailey Crofton, whose brother Casey Crofton died in the collision, attended the hearing.

"I was surprised at the lapses of safety protocols that led to this crash," he said in a statement afterward.

COLLISION ALARMS KEEP GOING OFF

Texas Sen. Ted Cruz said he learned that the Secret Service and U.S. Navy triggered a rash of collision alarms in planes around Reagan Airport on March 1 while testing anti-drone technology that used a similar frequency to the one used by planes' warning systems. Cruz said that happened despite a warning from the FAA against doing it.

"This is deeply disturbing that just a month after 67 people died while on approach to DCA (Reagan Airport), that the Secret Service and Pentagon would inadvertently cause multiple flights to receive urgent cockpit alerts recommending evasive action," Cruz said.

Helicopter traffic around Reagan National has been restricted since January any time planes use the same runway the American Airlines plane that crashed was approaching when it collided with the helicopter. At the NTSB's urging, the FAA permanently banned that particular helicopter route under

most circumstances. If a helicopter does use the route, planes are prohibited from taking off or landing on that runway.

THE ARMY STILL WASN'T BROADCASTING HELICOPTER LOCATIONS

The U.S. Army's head of aviation Brig. Gen. Matthew Braman acknowledged that as of Thursday morning helicopters were still flying over the nation's capital with a key system broadcasting their locations turned off during most missions because it deemed them sensitive.

Cruz called this "shocking and deeply unacceptable."

Rocheleau then said the FAA will immediately require all aircraft flying near Reagan National to broadcast their locations. The "ADS-B out data" is designed to help air traffic controllers better track an aircraft's location with position updates every second.

Before that announcement, exceptions in the airspace above Washington allowed Army and other government aircraft to fly without transmitting, or fly in a mode that allowed less information to be transmitted to avoid broadcasting potentially sensitive missions to the public.

Former Black Hawk pilot Tim Lilley, father of airliner copilot Sam Lilley, said he's disappointed that the Army

has not taken simple steps to improve safety he recommended in a meeting with Braman, including turning on the locator systems, adding a fourth crew member or barring the use of older Black Hawks on routes around Washington.

"I was frustrated with the lack of accountability. The Army still doesn't want to say that they did anything wrong," said Lilley, who flew helicopter routes around the capital for four years in the 1990s as part of a 20-year Army career and now flies private jets.

ARE THE SYSTEMS EVEN WORKING?

Homendy also noted that it is important to inspect the transmission equipment to make sure it actually works. The helicopter involved in this collision had not transmitted any location data for 730 days. When the NTSB checked the rest of the unit's helicopters after the crash, it found eight of them that hadn't transmitted since 2023.

Plus, Homendy said she's not sure what the Army was doing with any close call reports it received or how closely it was monitoring whether its helicopters violated altitude limits during their flights like the one that collided with the jetliner did. She said most of the safety conversations at the battalion level were focused on "OSHA slips, trips and falls."



Kenya Hunter | Associated Press

Signs placed by Mike Arnold, a supporter of Health Secretary Robert F. Kennedy Jr., are pictured as Arnold protests against the CDC outside the CDC campus in Atlanta on Thursday.

HHS will lay off 10K workers, close agencies

BY AMANDA SEITZ
ASSOCIATED PRESS

WASHINGTON — In a major overhaul, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services will lay off 10,000 workers and shut down entire agencies, including ones that oversee billions of dollars in funds for addiction services and community health centers across the country.

Health Secretary Robert F. Kennedy Jr. criticized the department he oversees as an inefficient "sprawling bureaucracy" in a video announcing the restructuring Thursday. He faulted the department's 82,000 workers for a decline in Americans' health.

"I want to promise you now that we're going to do more with less," Kennedy said in the video, posted to social media.

The restructuring plan caps weeks of tumult at the nation's top health department, which has been embroiled in rumors of mass firings, the revocation of \$11 billion in public health funding for cities and counties, a tepid response to a measles outbreak, and controversial remarks about vaccines from its new leader.

Still, Kennedy said a "painful period" lies ahead for HHS, which is responsible for monitoring infectious diseases, inspecting foods and hospitals, and overseeing health insurance programs for nearly half the country.

Overall, the department will downsize to 62,000 positions, losing nearly a quarter of its staff — 10,000 jobs through layoffs

and another 10,000 workers who took early retirement and voluntary separation offers encouraged by President Donald Trump's administration.

The staffing cuts were first reported by The Wall Street Journal.

Public health experts, doctors, current and former HHS workers and congressional Democrats quickly panned Kennedy's plans, warning they could have untold consequences for millions of people.

"These staff cuts endanger public health and food safety," said Brian Ronholm, director of food policy at Consumer Reports, in a statement. "They raise serious concerns that the administration's pledge to make Americans healthy again could become nothing more than an empty promise."

But Kennedy, in announcing the restructuring, blasted HHS for failing to improve Americans' lifespans and not doing enough to drive down chronic disease and cancer rates.

"All of that money," Kennedy said of the department's \$1.7 trillion yearly budget, "has failed to improve the health of Americans."

Cancer death rates have dropped 34% over the past two decades, translating to 4.5 million deaths avoided, according to the American Cancer Society. That's largely due to smoking cessation, the development of better treatments — many funded by the National Institutes of Health.

Anti-abortion groups aim to end Planned Parenthood funding

Some seek help from DOGE

BY CHRISTINE FERNANDO
ASSOCIATED PRESS

WASHINGTON — Major anti-abortion groups gathered in the nation's capital on Thursday to begin a lobbying effort with Congress and President Donald Trump's administration aimed at eliminating funding for Planned Parenthood, with some calling on Elon Musk to make the organization one of his cost-cutting targets.

The anti-abortion groups are taking aim at abortion providers under an initiative called Defund Planned Parenthood, which targets federal Medicaid funding for the reproductive health care provider. More than 150 of the groups signed a letter Wednesday urging Congress to cut Medicaid funding for Planned Parenthood and other health care centers through the budget reconciliation process.

"Today is a historic moment where the pro-

life movement stands united behind one message: Defund Planned Parenthood," said Kristan Hawkins, president of Students for Life of America, as she kicked off the rally in view of the U.S. Capitol.

She called on Trump and other Republicans to "defund your political enemies," adding that the abortion lobby has long targeted Republicans.

The federal Hyde Amendment already restricts government funding for most abortions, and less than 5% of the services Planned Parenthood provides are abortions, according to the organization's 2023 annual report.

Vicki Ringer, Planned Parenthood's South Carolina director of public affairs, said claims that Planned Parenthood uses Medicaid funding for abortion is "an attempt to mislead the public" and emphasized Planned Parenthood's role in providing broader repro-



Jose Luis Magana | Associated Press

Kristan Hawkins, president of Students for Life of America, speaks during an anti-abortion rally on Capitol Hill in Washington on Thursday.

ductive health care.

"We should be expanding health care to low-income people rather than trying to kick off these people who rely on us for health care," Ringer said.

Planned Parenthood provides a wide range of services besides abortion. Its most recent annual report shows that contraceptive services and testing and treatment for sexually transmitted infections make up the vast majority of its medical care. It also performs

more cancer screening and prevention procedures than abortions, according to the report.

The national group said eliminating its federal funding could put those services out of reach for millions of people and would hit low-income communities with little access to health care hardest.

Rachel Rebouche, dean of Temple University's Beasley School of Law, said the Defund Planned Parenthood movement has been

building for 10 years but has gained momentum as the anti-abortion movement has been emboldened by Trump's presidential victory and by Republicans winning control of Congress in November.

"We're seeing more enthusiasm in states like South Carolina and others to close down Planned Parenthood under the banner of stopping abortions, which their laws already do," she said.

Tina Whittington, executive vice president at Students for Life, said she was confident that Trump would consider cutting Planned Parenthood's Medicaid funding and that Musk's Department of Government Efficiency could be just the tool for doing it.

"I'm more confident because we're in an era where DOGE's actions are targeting waste, fraud and abuse," she said. "And this is a great way to do that."

The Supreme Court announced it will hear a case involving South Carolina's attempt to strip Medicaid funding for Planned Par-

enthod. Experts say the lawsuit could prompt similar efforts in conservative states across the country to chip away at the organization's funding.

During a 2015 push to strip Planned Parenthood funding, the Congressional Budget Office estimated that doing so would cost the government \$130 million over 10 years.

Meanwhile, lawmakers in at least three states — Missouri, Ohio and South Carolina — have introduced bills this year aiming to create tax breaks for anti-abortion centers.

The strategies come during a time when abortion rights advocates are warning that Trump and his Cabinet hold significant power to restrict access to medication abortion nationwide.

Rather than immediately heeding calls from anti-abortion allies to restrict Medicaid funding for clinics that provide abortions, Trump has made quieter moves after waffling on the issue on the campaign trail.