

United States Senate

May 7, 2025

The Honorable Sean Duffy
Secretary of Transportation
Department of Transportation
1200 New Jersey Avenue, SE
Washington, DC 20590

The Honorable Pete Hegseth
Secretary of Defense
Department of Defense
1000 Defense Pentagon
Washington, DC 20301

Secretary Hegseth and Secretary Duffy,

I write to you concerned about the ongoing air safety issues at Ronald Reagan Washington National Airport (DCA). Since the beginning of the new year, DCA has faced significant challenges, marked by a fatal midair collision, multiple near-misses, and several aborted landings. Following these repeated events, it is incumbent on our country's transportation and military leadership to take the necessary precautions and measures to reassure the American people that our nation's busiest runway¹ is indeed safe.

DCA, known for its narrow, restricted corridor for take-offs and landings, is routinely rated by pilots as one of the most challenging airports.² These challenges are exacerbated by the fact that DCA handles more passengers today—25 million annually—than at any other point in its history.³ Navigating these issues, while difficult, are able to be overcome, given DCA's historic record of protecting air travel passengers from catastrophic events.

It is in this context that make the events following January 1, 2025, so concerning. Beginning January 28th, on which a plane was forced to abort its landing due to a helicopter flying directly into the passenger jet's flight path,⁴ DCA has had numerous events jeopardizing air traffic safety. None of these events, however, are worse than what happened the next day on January 29th. On this tragic day, an American Airlines flight collided in midair on approach to DCA with an Army Black Hawk helicopter, killing all 67 souls aboard the aircrafts and producing the deadliest air accident in over 20 years.⁵

¹ Mimi Montgomery, "Why Reagan National Airport Has the Country's Busiest Runway," Axios (Axios Washington D.C., January 30, 2025), <https://www.axios.com/local/washington-dc/2025/01/30/dca-reagan-busiest-airport-runway>.

² "Protecting the DCA Perimeter," www.mwaa.com, n.d., <https://www.mwaa.com/protecting-dca-perimeter>.

³ Ibid.

⁴ "Day before Washington DC Crash, Another Plane Aborted Landing at Reagan Airport — the Reason May Surprise," The Economic Times (Economic Times, January 31, 2025), <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/international/us/day-before-washington-dc-crash-another-plane-aborted-landing-at-reagan-airport-the-reason-may-surprise-you/articleshow/117801689.cms?from=mdr>.

⁵ Lolita Baldour et al., "Midair Collision Kills 67 People in the Deadliest US Air Disaster in Almost a Quarter Century," AP News, January 30, 2025, <https://apnews.com/article/ronald-reagan-national-airport-crash-62adba7fb1f546b4cf1716e42b86482b>.

Shortly thereafter in February, an arriving American Airlines flight was forced to abort landing due to another aircraft being on the runway,⁶ and, just a month later on March 28th, a formation of military jets came within seconds of crashing into a Delta Air Lines flight.⁷ Notably, this latter close call occurred in sequential proximity to a reported fight breaking out in the control tower at DCA.⁸

Less than one month ago, two American Airlines jets, carrying hundreds of Americans and six members of Congress, clipped wings while grounded.⁹ Then, just last week, two commercial flights aborted their landings due to an Army Black Hawk helicopter being in their near vicinity.¹⁰ Concerningly, this most recent event closely mirrored the January 29th crash at DCA.

Following these events, it is abundantly clear that changes have to be made to protect air passengers flying in and out of DCA. I commend the subsequent efforts made by the Pentagon and the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) to create a safer environment at DCA, including:

- Restrictions on helicopter traffic in DCA airspace¹¹
- Eliminating mixed helicopter and fixed-wing aircraft traffic¹²
- Deploying artificial intelligence tools to sift through data¹³
- Reducing flight arrivals at DCA from 28 to 26 per hour¹⁴
- Increasing support and oversight for the air traffic controller team at DCA¹⁵

Additionally, I appreciate Secretary Duffy's swift usage of appropriated funds to support air traffic control modernization this year¹⁶ and implementing authorized safety enhancements within the FAA reauthorization last year.¹⁷ Yet, given that near-misses and aborted landings continue to occur relatively frequently, it is clear that additional restrictions and alterations are necessary. Not making further changes could spell further disaster at DCA.

⁶ Matthew Rehbein, Alexandra Skores, and Sara Smart, "American Airlines Flight Forced to Abort Landing at Reagan National Airport to Avoid Another Plane," CNN, February 26, 2025, <https://www.cnn.com/2025/02/26/us/reagan-national-american-airlines-go-around/index.html>.

⁷ Pete Muntean, "Near-Collision Investigation Reveals Reagan National Airport Controllers Failed to Stop Flights during Military Flyover," CNN, April 8, 2025, <https://www.cnn.com/2025/04/08/politics/reagan-national-airport-near-collision-investigation-military-flyover/index.html>.

⁸ Kris Van Cleave, Ryan Sprouse, and Olivia Rinaldi, "Reported Fight in Control Tower at Reagan National Airport under Investigation by FAA, Man Arrested," CBSnews.com (CBS News, April 1, 2025), <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/dca-airport-fight-control-tower-reagan-national-faa-arrest/>.

⁹ Ana Faguy, "Two American Airlines Jets Clip Wings on Ground at Reagan Airport," BBC, April 10, 2025, <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c0qngzv1dgo>.

¹⁰ Pete Muntean, "Army Halts Some Helicopter Flights to Pentagon Following 2 Aborted Landings at Reagan National Airport," CNN, May 5, 2025, <https://www.cnn.com/2025/05/02/us/ntsb-investigation-dca-aborted-landings>.

¹¹ "FAA Statements on Midair Collision at Reagan Washington National Airport | Federal Aviation Administration," Faa.gov (Federal Aviation Administration, 2025), <https://www.faa.gov/newsroom/faa-statements-midair-collision-reagan-washington-national-airport>.

¹² Russell Lewis, "'There's a Serious Safety Issue,' Investigators Say Following DCA Midair Collision," NPR, March 12, 2025, <https://www.npr.org/2025/03/11/nx-s1-5324543/ntsb-dca-mid-air-collision-american-black-hawk>.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ David Shepardson, "Exclusive: US FAA to Slow Arrivals at Reagan National Airport to Reduce Risks after Crash," Reuters, February 6, 2025, <https://www.reuters.com/world/us/us-faa-slow-arrivals-reagan-national-airport-reduce-risks-after-crash-2025-02-06/>.

¹⁵ Zach Wichter, "More Staff, Traffic Review: Safety Changes Coming to Washington's Busiest Airport," USA TODAY, April 3, 2025, <https://www.usatoday.com/story/travel/news/2025/04/02/faa-national-airport-safety-steps/82777651007/>.

¹⁶ "DIVISION A-FULL-YEAR CONTINUING APPROPRIATIONS ACT, 2025 TITLE I-GENERAL PROVISIONS," accessed May 6, 2025, <https://appropriations.house.gov/sites/evo-subsites/republicans-appropriations.house.gov/files/evo-media-document/full-year-cr-2025-section-by-section-final.pdf>.

¹⁷ "Senate Overwhelmingly Approves FAA Reauthorization Act," U.S. Senate Committee on Commerce, Science, & Transportation, May 9, 2024, <https://www.commerce.senate.gov/2024/5/senate-overwhelmingly-approves-faa-reauthorization-act>.

To facilitate enhanced safety at DCA, please respond to the following questions no later than July 1, 2025.

1. Since January 1, 2025, two of the most high-profile incidents and tragedies at DCA involved military-civilian airspace coordination. Historically, commercial planes and military aircraft, particularly helicopters, have delicately shared the airspace at DCA, with near accidents occurring from time to time. Moving forward, what concrete steps are you taking to create a better working environment between the Pentagon and the FAA? How can your departments better prioritize civilian safety over military operations, especially for non-essential activities?
2. Secretary Duffy has been clear that the helicopter restrictions around DCA remain in effect, meaning that the May near miss between a military helicopter and commercial aircraft is likely due to the Army flouting the current rules. If it is true that the Black Hawk “took a scenic route around the Pentagon versus proceeding directly from the west to the heliport,”¹⁸ what actions is the Pentagon taking to reprimand the pilots responsible for this error that jeopardized air traffic safety? What additional arrangements is the Pentagon taking to remind pilots that the FAA restrictions regarding DCA airspace remain in effect?
3. How can the Department of Defense and the Department of Transportation—specifically the Federal Aviation Administration—safely provide for all air traffic passengers coming to and from DCA? What specific actions is each Department taking?

Thank you in advance for your continued work and willingness to ensure that another tragedy does not occur at DCA. I look forward to receiving your responses.

Sincerely,



Roger Marshall, M.D.
United States Senator

¹⁸ Katherine Long, “‘Take a Taxi or Uber’: Duffy Blasts Defense Department after Incident in DC Airspace,” POLITICO (Politico, May 3, 2025), <https://www.politico.com/news/2025/05/03/duffy-defense-department-reagan-national-airport-00325195>.