

Opening Statement of U.S. Senator Kyrsten Sinema, Chair
Senate Subcommittee on Aviation Safety, Operations, and Innovation
“Developing the Aviation Workforce of the 21st Century”
Goodyear, AZ
May 13, 2022

Welcome to the Senate Subcommittee on Aviation Safety, Operations, and Innovation.

I thank everyone for joining us today here in sunny Goodyear, Arizona for a field hearing of the Aviation subcommittee.

As you know, we generally hold our hearings in Washington, DC, and I’m glad to hold this hearing today outside the “DC bubble,” here in Arizona – which is far nicer than being in Washington.

Also, being here in Arizona allows the subcommittee to hear directly from so many Arizonans who spend their time thinking about aviation – and particularly, the aviation workforce.

As we think about the aviation industry, safety is the most important priority and needs to remain the focus of all our efforts. I recognize the efforts of aviation safety advocates, including the families who have lost loved ones in aviation accidents.

For the United States to remain the global leader on aviation safety, we need to have both the infrastructure and the workforce in place to ensure safety.

Regarding aviation infrastructure, I was honored to help lead the effort to pass the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law last year. I appreciate the efforts of so many colleagues on both sides of the aisle to work together to pass a historic bill that provides significant investments in highways, bridges, Western water projects, ports of entry, and public transit – and the largest investment in our nation’s aviation infrastructure in a generation.

In total, the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law includes an additional 25 billion dollars for aviation over five years, on top of existing aviation funding. The law dedicates 15 billion dollars in formula funding directly to airports that can be used to improve runways, taxiways, and other critical aviation safety needs. The bill also invests five billion dollars to a new competitive grant program focused on modernizing airport terminals, and five billion dollars for air traffic control infrastructure.

Over the next five years, Arizona airports will receive at least 360 million dollars under the provisions of the infrastructure law. In 2022, Phoenix Sky Harbor International Airport will receive over 41 million dollars, Tucson International Airport will receive over six million dollars, and Phoenix-Goodyear Airport, where we are today, will receive nearly 300 thousand dollars for infrastructure improvements.

This funding will enable our airports to complete the maintenance and modernization projects required to safely and efficiently move Arizonans around the country and welcome visitors to Arizona. On a typical day at Sky Harbor, over twelve hundred flights arrive or depart and over 125 thousand passengers pass through its gates.

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In addition to aviation infrastructure, the aviation workforce is another key element to ensuring aviation safety and ensuring that our aviation economy continues to expand and modernize.

The COVID-19 pandemic represented the most significant challenge to our aviation system in decades, and I was proud to work with the leadership of the Commerce Committee and with other colleagues on the Aviation Subcommittee to advance bipartisan efforts to protect the aviation workforce from massive layoffs.

If you remember back to the Spring of 2019, passenger traffic had fallen 95 percent – and absent congressional action, air carriers would have had to furlough hundreds of thousands of employees. But thanks to the Payroll Support Program in the CARES Act, we were able to protect those jobs and ensure continued air service for smaller communities that would have otherwise lost flights.

On the manufacturing side of the industry, the Aviation Manufacturing Jobs Protection program in the American Rescue Plan Act of 2021 provided key payroll support to aviation supply chain companies. This provision saved over 30,000 jobs across the country.

As we look forward to a brighter future after COVID, we are experiencing a tight labor market across the entire economy, with nationwide unemployment rates near historic lows for months.

Given these national trends – and reports of difficulties filling certain positions at regional airlines – now is a good time to check on the current state of the aviation workforce.

While pilots are often a point of focus, it’s important to consider the state of the workforce for all aviation careers, including the maintenance workers who upkeep our aircraft and the manufacturers who build new aviation technologies – not to mention the flight attendants, air traffic controllers, airport workers, and countless others who contribute to a safe and enjoyable aviation system. We must ensure that we have the pipeline to satisfy the future demand for this wide range of employees.

At a hearing in our committee last week, Secretary of Transportation Pete Buttigieg identified similar concerns and indicated that we all needed to work together to support a stronger pipeline of people into the aviation field.

And in order to meet our future needs, I believe we must work harder to show all Americans that a career in aviation can be an accessible and rewarding option for them, regardless of their gender, race, or ethnicity.

Currently, about 5 percent of pilots are women and about 6 percent are people of color, according to federal data.

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Cost is also an important consideration. Aviation training can be an expensive undertaking. As Americans and our small businesses are seeing increased prices – particularly the rising cost of fuel – we should understand the impact of aviation fuel prices and other inflationary pressures on pilot training.

As this committee looks forward to reauthorizing the Federal Aviation Administration next year, we will consider opportunities to strengthen the pipeline, support opportunities to diversify the workforce, and consider whether we need to refine existing programs – such as the FAA Aviation Workforce Development grant program – to ensure they are effective tools for workforce development.

I am so pleased to host today’s subcommittee at the United Aviate Academy in Goodyear, Arizona. The Academy opened in January with the goal to expand United Airlines’ pipeline for pilot training and – as a pilot academy owned by a major U.S. airline – represents a new model for pilot training in the United States. United Airlines plans to train five thousand new pilots at the school by 2030 and has the goal that half of its students will be women or people of color.

Thank you to the United Aviate Academy for hosting us today and for selecting Arizona as your home.

This is an exciting time for Arizona aviation. Arizona is a national leader in many aspects of aviation, and we are proud of the industry’s important role in the state.

Arizona’s airports, along with commercial aviation, aerospace manufacturing, and research and development, contribute over one hundred billion dollars to our state’s economy annually, provide over two hundred thousand Arizona jobs, and indirectly support hundreds of thousands of other non-aviation jobs.

We have an excellent panel today – with witnesses representing our host, the United Aviate Academy, along with an Arizona-based regional airline, a representative from the Air Line Pilots Association who has helped with the Aviate Academy, and two Arizona institutions of higher education that develop our aviation workforce.

Our panel will consider the state of the aviation workforce, how to ensure we have the appropriate pipeline of aviation workers for the future, how to ensure that our aviation workforce is drawing talented professionals from all backgrounds, and ultimately how to ensure that the U.S. aviation system remains the gold standard for the world.

Thank you all for joining us today.