

CUI

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(U) Evaluation of the DoW Air Traffic Control Workforce

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(U) Executive Summary

(U) Why We Did This Evaluation

(U) Our evaluation focused on the classification of the civilian air traffic control (ATC) specialist positions across the Department of War (DoW).¹ ATC specialists direct both DoW and civilian aircraft to ensure that their movement along air routes and airports is safe, orderly, and efficient. The DoW continues to experience a shortage of ATC specialists that hinders mission readiness. To assess the effectiveness of the DoW's management of the DoW civilian ATC workforce, we evaluated the challenges the DoW faces in sustaining this workforce and reviewed the actions taken to address both immediate and long-term ATC specialist shortages. We also assessed how civilian ATC specialist shortfalls affect overall mission readiness. In a January 2025 "Message to the Force," the Secretary of War explained the DoW's priorities, including a focus on lethality and readiness—objectives that rely on a fully staffed and capable ATC workforce.

(U) What We Found and Impact

~~(CUI)~~ Army, Marine Corps, Navy, and Air Force officials (Service officials) faced challenges managing and sustaining their civilian ATC workforce. Specifically, Service officials experienced ATC manning shortfalls and could not attract and retain qualified personnel. [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] and according to a 2026 RAND research report, the DoW ATC workforce has lower compensation compared with other Federal agencies, such as the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA), making it difficult to attract and retain qualified personnel.² In addition, Service officials inconsistently determined the DoW ATC specialists' grade levels using a standard that, according to DoW officials, did not recognize the current complexities and workload encountered by DoW ATC specialists.

(U) This occurred because the Office of Personnel Management (OPM) has not updated the 1978 classification standard, which OPM originally created for FAA ATC specialists (civilians), to reflect the modern military ATC environment. In addition, while not required to do so, DoW officials did not centrally oversee how the Services determined grade levels for ATC specialists.

¹ (U) This report contains information that has been redacted because it was identified by the Department of War as Controlled Unclassified Information (CUI) that is not releasable to the public. CUI is Government-created or owned unclassified information that allows for, or requires, safeguarding and dissemination controls in accordance with laws, regulations, or Government-wide policies.

² (U) RAND, RR-A3734-1, "Civilian Workforce Challenges for Department of the Air Force Air Operations, Development and Assessment of Alternative Civilian Personnel System," March 20, 2026.

~~(CUI)~~ As a result, the Services are experiencing shortages of ATC specialists and gaps in recruitment that hinder their ability to fulfill DoW mission requirements. [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] According to Air Force officials, mis-graded and inaccurately described ATC positions do not attract and retain qualified personnel, which contributes to chronic staffing shortfalls across the ATC workforce that hinder mission readiness. The shortages are causing a reduction in ATC services, decreased operational efficiency, and less pilot training because ATC personnel are not available to manage the aircraft's movement along air routes. Improving the management of the ATC workforce will make the DoW more competitive in attracting and sustaining ATC specialists that support pilot training, airfield maintenance, and overseas operations, which may improve DoW readiness.

(U) Please see our recommendations on the next page.

(U) Recommendations Table

(U) Responsible Management Official	Recommendation	Implementation Status
1. Under Secretary of War for Personnel and Readiness	1. Evaluate the need for legislative action to allow for flexibility in recruiting and retaining air traffic control specialists and issue a formal decision memorandum detailing the planned course of action.	In Progress
2. Under Secretary of War for Personnel and Readiness	2. In consultation with the Office of Personnel Management, develop a plan with milestones for implementation to update the grade level determination guidance of the "Position Classification Standard for Air Traffic Control Series, (GS-2152)," TS-31, June 1978, to better reflect the complexities of DoW air traffic control specialists.	In Progress
3. Under Secretary of War for Personnel and Readiness	3. Develop guidance that aids Service personnel in consistently applying the OPM's revised Position Classification Standard for Air Traffic Control Series (GS-2152) and appropriate air traffic control subject matter experts to determine the grade levels of DoW air traffic control specialists.	In Progress
4. Under Secretary of War for Personnel and Readiness	4. Designate an organization responsible for ensuring that the Services consistently apply the OPM's revised Position Classification Standard for Air Traffic Control Series (GS-2152) during the grade level determination process for DoW air traffic control specialist positions.	In Progress (U)

(U) NOTE: In Progress, Unresolved, and No Response recommendations are considered open recommendations.

(U) Implementation Status

- (U) **Closed** – The DoW OIG has verified that DoW management completed the corrective actions.
- (U) **In Progress** – The DoW OIG and DoW management have agreed on corrective action(s) that will address the recommendation. This recommendation is considered resolved in accordance with M-25-01, "Revised OMB Circular A-50, Audit, Inspection, or Evaluation Follow-Up," November 7, 2024.
- (U) **Unresolved** – The DoW OIG determined that the proposed actions described in DoW management comments do not address the recommendation.
- (U) **No Response** – DoW management did not respond.

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(U) Background

(U) DoW Aviation Activities

(U) The National Airspace System (NAS) is a common network of U.S. airspace facilities, equipment, services, manpower, and airports where both DoW and civilian aircraft operate.³ While the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) is responsible for the overall safety and efficiency of the NAS, the DoW also provides an ATC workforce and uses the airspace for training, transport, and operational needs. The DoW has an interest in ensuring and enhancing its ability to operate seamlessly with civil aviation in both national and international airspace. According to the DoW Policy Board on Federal Aviation (PBFA), the DoW provides critical NAS support by coordinating and controlling military and civilian airspace usage, owning and managing the world's largest aircraft fleets, and overseeing military and joint space launches and recoveries.⁴ The primary purpose of the ATC system is to prevent a collision involving aircraft operating in the system.

(U) According to the PBFA, as of November 2025, the DoW trained and provided over 15,000 aviation professionals to support the NAS, including ATC specialists, airfield specialists, and airfield maintainers. DoW aviation professionals operate over 300 airfields worldwide, and in FY 2024 supported over 12.5 million ATC operations.⁵ According to Air Force officials, in FY 2024, the DoW controlled 29 percent of the NAS air traffic activities, with the FAA controlling 71 percent.

(U) DoW ATC Specialists

(U) According to section 2109, title 5, United States Code (5 U.S.C. § 2109), an ATC specialist is a civilian employee of the Department of Transportation (DoT) or the DoW who is actively engaged in:

- (U) the separation and control of air traffic;
- (U) providing preflight, inflight, or airport advisory service to aircraft operators; or

³ (U) ATC facilities provide ATC services and airspace management. Specifically, ATC facilities serve as air navigation service providers for DoW, allied, and civil aircraft in support of national objectives.

⁴ (U) The PBFA was established in 1967 and is responsible for the interactions between DoW and FAA. Specifically, PBFA works policy issues involving the NAS with the FAA, such as unresolved operational issues and issues affecting all Services.

⁵ (U) ATC operations include instrument flight rules (IFR), visual flight rules (VFR), civil operations, and air carrier operations. IFR govern flights conducted in instrument meteorological conditions, which are meteorological conditions expressed in terms of visibility, distance from cloud, and ceiling (height above the earth of the lowest layer of clouds) less than the minimum specified for visual meteorological conditions. VFR are rules that govern the procedures for conducting flight under visual conditions.

- (U) is the immediate supervisor of the employee providing these services in an ATC facility.⁶

(U) The FAA, an element of the DoT, is the organization responsible for regulating civilian aviation, including developing and operating a system of ATC and navigation for both civil and military aircraft and employing ATC specialists. The DoW employs military, civilian, and contractor ATC specialists who provide ATC services. The civilian ATC specialists are within the General Schedule (GS)-2152 ATC series and manage aircraft to ensure their movement along air routes and airports is safe, orderly, and efficient.⁷ According to the Office of Personnel Management (OPM), “Position Classification Standard for Air Traffic Control Series, GS-2152,” TS-31, June 1978 (1978 OPM classification standard), this position requires applying an extensive knowledge of the laws, rules, regulations, and procedures governing the movement of air traffic, often under conditions of great stress.

(U) DoW Organizational Responsibilities for ATCs

(U) According to DoW officials, although the DoW does not have an organization that centrally manages the ATC workforce, the DoW established a functional community, with the DAF serving as the lead, in November 2024.⁸ This functional community provides a unified voice for civilian air operations interests and strengthens advocacy at DoW-level forums. Specifically, the functional community provides strategic oversight, fosters collaboration across the Services, and supports joint efforts in civilian air operations talent management.

(U) In addition, the Office of the Deputy Assistant Secretary of War for Civilian Personnel Policy (DASW[CPP]) and the Defense Civilian Personnel Advisory Service (DCPAS), both within the Office of the Under Secretary of War for Personnel and Readiness, support DoW Components in developing civilian personnel policy and human resources solutions that strengthen mission readiness. According to DASW(CPP) and DCPAS officials, DASW(CPP) oversees DoW functional communities. According to DCPAS, examples of functional communities include administrative support, contracting, cyber, and human resources.

⁶ (U) Based on FAA Order JO 7110.65BB, “Air Traffic Control,” February 20, 2025, the definition for a “controller” and ATC “specialist” is the same.

⁷ (U) The GS classification and pay system covers most civilian white-collar Federal employees in professional, technical, administrative, and clerical positions. The GS has 15 grades - GS-1 (lowest) to GS-15 (highest). Agencies establish or classify the grade of each job based on the level of difficulty, responsibility, and qualifications required.

⁸ (U) The DoW uses functional communities to improve strategic and workforce planning, coordinate best practices, increase attention on marketing DoW civilian careers, and continue efforts to develop innovative methods to attract and retain a highly qualified workforce.

(U) DoW Civilian ATC Specialist Classification Standards

(U) Personnel and operating officials at many organizational levels of Federal agencies evaluate positions in the Federal service, including the civilian ATC specialists. They also assign a grade level based on the duties and responsibilities assigned and the qualifications required to do the work. According to OPM's "The Classifiers Handbook," TS-107, August 1991 (classifier handbook), the standards used to determine the grade level play an important role in assuring a sound Federal personnel management program.⁹ In June 1978, OPM issued the 1978 OPM classification standard to provide grade level classification for positions involving direct control of ATC operations. According to 5 U.S.C. § 2109, these positions pertained only to civilian employees at the DoT and the DoW. However, on April 1, 1996, Congress granted the FAA the authority to create its own pay system for ATC specialists, which meant that the FAA did not have to comply with 5 U.S.C. § 2109 or the 1978 OPM classification standard.¹⁰ As a result, only the DoW must comply with the 1978 OPM classification standard to classify civilian positions, including determining the grade level. DoD Instruction (DoDI) 1400.25, "DoD Civilian Personnel Management System: Classification Program," volume 511, authorizes the Services to perform these classifications and determinations.¹¹

⁹ (U) The classifier handbook provides background information, general concepts, and technical guidance to aid those who classify positions in selecting, interpreting, and applying the OPM classification standard. According to the classifier handbook, the OPM classification standard is recognized as the official document used for classifying positions. For this evaluation, we assessed the Services' use of the OPM classification standards and not the classifiers handbook.

¹⁰ (U) This authority was granted in Public Law 104-50, "Department of Transportation and Related Agencies Appropriations Act, 1996," section 347, November 15, 1995; and section 40122, title 49, U.S.C (49 U.S.C. § 40122).

¹¹ (U) DoDI 1400.25, "DoD Civilian Personnel Management System: Classification Program," volume 511, May 28, 2015.

(U) Evaluation Results

(U) The DoW Faced Staffing Challenges with the Civilian ATC Workforce

(U) Military Service officials faced challenges managing and sustaining their civilian ATC workforce. According to an Air Force official, the Air Force is experiencing manning shortfalls across the ATC workforce because they cannot attract and retain qualified personnel. [REDACTED]

[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]

(U) According to a 2026 RAND report, the FAA is the Air Force's biggest Government competitor for ATC specialists, as the FAA provides better pay and benefits. This pay difference is due to Congress authorizing the FAA in 1996 to create its own personnel system to address challenges related to hiring and retaining pilots and ATC specialists.¹³ Specifically, according to the 2026 RAND report, the overall average ATC specialist pay across all of the DAF is about \$113,032, while the average total pay for FAA ATC specialists is \$161,150, a difference of about 43 percent. The report also states that the FAA's pay-banded systems help provide greater pay flexibility and address pay disparities. According to DAF officials, roughly 35 percent of all ATC separations from the DAF are due to a transfer to the FAA.

(U) The Services Inconsistently Determined Civilian ATC Specialist Grade Levels

(U) Service officials inconsistently determined civilian ATC specialist grade levels using the 1978 OPM classification standard that, according to DoW and Service officials, did not recognize the current complexities and workload encountered by DoW ATC specialists at DoW facilities. Section 5104, title 5, United States Code (5 U.S.C. § 5104), "Basis for Grading Positions," states that GS positions are divided into grades based on difficulty and responsibility of work. The 1978 OPM classification standard directs that ATC specialists must be graded based on two factors: 1) their knowledge, skills, and abilities, and 2) the ATC facility's complexity. According to the classifier handbook, carefully following these guidelines should ensure correct classification decisions.

¹² (U) Department of the Navy, Memorandum for the Record, "Naval Air Station Lemoore Air Traffic Control Manning Issues and Implications to Air Operations Starting October 2024," July 11, 2024.

¹³ (U) The FAA's personnel system is a pay band structure for ATC specialists that recognizes the ATC specialists' level of experience and the intensity of working in a particular facility. The FAA personnel system provides a pay incentive for working in a more complex and stressful environment.

(U) According to Service officials, focusing on confirming that grade classifications are accurate and consistent is vital to ensure that the DoW has the ATC specialist workforce to sustain ATC facility operating hours and train future military and ATC specialists.

(U) Service officials stated that the classifiers used the 1978 OPM classification standard to classify and make grade level determinations for the ATC specialists; however, each Service used different processes and organizations.¹⁴ Table 1 shows the Services' grade level determination process.

(U) Table 1. Services' Grade Level Determination Process

(U) Service	Grade Level Determination Process
Army	According to a classification officer within the Civilian Human Resources Agency, the supervisory ATC or airfield manager responsible for the ATC specialist position will request the classification of the new ATC position. According to the classification officer, the classifiers, who are part of the Civilian Human Resources Service Center, will work with the hiring manager, draft position descriptions using the 1978 OPM classification standard, and submit the grade level determination to the Office of the Army Deputy Chief of Staff, G-1, for review and approval.*
Marine Corps	A human resources specialist in the Marine Corps Manpower & Reserve Affairs office explained that although the office assists in the classification and dispute process, the installation command's human resources office requiring the ATC specialist position performs the grade level classification using the 1978 OPM standard.
Navy	According to an official within the Commander, Navy Installations Command, the Classification Center of Excellence provides advisory and classification services. An Airfield Operations Regional Program Director stated that position descriptions and grade levels are tailored to each ATC facility and determined at the installation's command level, generally based on the facility type. The official within the Commander, Navy Installations Command, also stated that the classification for every vacant position is not typically reclassified.
Air Force	An Air Force Personnel Center official stated that the Air Force Personnel Center and the Air Force Materiel Command within the Air Force has classification authority to make grade level determinations for ATC specialists. The Air Force Personnel Center official stated that the Air Force Personnel Center and the Air Force Materiel Command have different processes and interpretations on how to implement the grade level determinations based on the 1978 OPM classification standards, leading to inconsistencies.

(U)

* (U) The Army Deputy Chief of Staff, G-1, develops and implements policy and leads programs that build personnel readiness in the Army.

(U) Source: DoW OIG, based on information from the Army, Marine Corps, Navy, and Air Force.

¹⁴ (U) The Service officials included the Army Civilian Human Resources Agency, Marine Corps Manpower and Reserve Affairs, Navy Installations Command Civilian Human Resources, and the Air Force Personnel Center.

(U) Additionally, we found that the Services were not consistently classifying the position grade levels for ATC specialists who work in similar types of ATC facilities. The different categories of ATC facilities include non-approach, nonradar approach, limited radar approach, or full-radar approach.¹⁵ See Appendix B for an explanation of the responsibilities of the ATC specialists within each type of facility.

(CUI) Within the 1978 OPM classification standard, the description of each grade level, GS-5 through GS-14, details the factors common to the position. Starting at the GS-10 level, the 1978 OPM classification standard explains the specific skills and abilities required and the assignments and work situations performed at that level, to include the type of facility and the traffic count.¹⁶ Based on the facility type factor in the 1978 OPM classification standard, classification grading generally assigns the GS-10 grade level to ATC specialists working in non-approach facilities and generally assigns the GS-11 grade level to radar approach. However, when we compared the non-approach ATC facilities across the Services, we found that in FY 2025, [REDACTED]

Naval Station Norfolk facility with an air traffic count of 44,133 had six GS-12s and no GS-10s, while Randolph Air Force Base (AFB) with an air traffic count of 172,934 had eight GS-10s and eight GS-11s.¹⁷ Table 2 shows a comparison across the Services of examples of grade level inconsistencies based on their assignment to a non-approach facility and the ATC facilities' corresponding air traffic counts.

¹⁵ (U) A non-approach control tower authorizes aircraft to land or takeoff at the airport controlled by the tower or to transit to specific airspace and the primary function is the sequencing of aircraft in the traffic pattern and on the landing area. Non-approach towers also provide ground control services to aircraft, vehicles, personnel, and equipment on the airport movement area. Nonradar approach describes guidance given for the final approach using instruments when ground-based precision or surveillance radar is not provided. Radar approach facilities use radar and nonradar capabilities to provide approach control services to aircraft arriving, departing, or transitioning airspace controlled by the facility.

¹⁶ (U) The 1978 OPM classification standard does not break down the type of facility or traffic count for GS-5 through GS-9 grade levels since they are trainee and developmental positions.

¹⁷ (U) Air traffic count is the number of individual aircraft encountered over a period of time.

(U) Table 2. Services' Non-Approach ATC Facility Comparison of Grade Level Inconsistencies (as of September 30, 2025)

(CUI) Service (Installation)	Air Traffic Count (FY 2025)	Number of GS-10 ATC Specialists	Number of GS-11 ATC Specialists	Number of GS-12 ATC Specialists
[REDACTED]	[REDACTED]	[REDACTED]	[REDACTED]	[REDACTED]
Navy (Naval Station Norfolk)	44,133	0	0	6
Air Force (Randolph AFB)	172,934	8	8	0 (CUI)

(U) Note: We did not include the Army in the comparison table because the Army could not provide data by facility type listed in the 1978 OPM classification standard.

(U) Source: The DoW OIG, based on data from the Marine Corps, Navy, and Air Force.

(U) In addition to inconsistencies across the Services, an Air Force official highlighted inconsistencies in grade levels at different Air Force ATC facilities. Despite being the Air Force's busiest airfield, Randolph AFB classifies its ATC specialists at the GS-10 level, which is the lowest for this position. In contrast, other Air Force facilities with lower traffic and less complexity, such as Robins AFB, classify their specialists at higher GS-11 or GS-12 levels.

(U) The OPM Grade Level Standard Did Not Recognize Current Complexities

(U) According to DoW and Service officials, the 1978 OPM classification standard did not recognize the current complexities and workload elements encountered by DoW ATC specialists at DoW facilities. In 2022, Army, Marine Corps, Navy, and Air Force officials jointly submitted a request to DCPAS for an extensive revision of the 1978 OPM classification standard for the ATC specialist positions. Specifically, Service officials expressed concern that the grade level criteria did not align with changes to the types of ATC facilities, technology, aircraft types, airspace classification, and the complexity or workload factors relevant to the ATC specialists over the past 48 years. According to a DCPAS official, DCPAS was unable to support the revision request to OPM and would not take further action. The DCPAS official stated that, among the reasons for closing the request, DCPAS officials determined that the revision request was not a viable proposal, due to OPM's workload constraints.¹⁸

¹⁸ (U) In October 2022, a DCPAS official communicated that OPM was focusing its limited resources on legislative and administrative priorities at that time, and that OPM was not planning any updates to existing standards.

(U) Although classifiers should use multiple factors to make grade level determinations, as required by the 1978 OPM classification standard, Service officials relied heavily on the traffic density counts to make a final grade level determination. However, according to DoW officials, one of the main concerns of using the 1978 OPM classification standard is the inflexibility of the traffic density ranges used during the grade level determination. According to the Services' 2022 requested OPM revisions, traffic density places an extraordinary demand on the skills, abilities, and judgment of the controller. As the level of air traffic increases, there is a proportionally greater requirement in the amount of coordination required, as well as a corresponding decrease in the amount of time to make control decisions. However, the 1978 OPM classification standard is based on 1975 through 1976 data and is no longer linked to current controller work situations or the accuracy of the current density calculations. Furthermore, according to Air Force officials, OPM did not include in the 1978 OPM classification standard types of factors that are now present in today's environments. Examples of factors that were not included are remotely piloted aircraft, unmanned aerial systems, complex airspace runway configurations, and the challenge of separating diverse aircraft types. As a result, classifiers are not giving these types of factors weighted value in determining grade classification because the 1978 OPM classification standard does not require consideration of them.

(U) OPM Has Not Updated the Grade Level Determination Standard Since 1978

(U) OPM established the classification standard in 1978 to determine the appropriate grade level of ATC specialist at the FAA and has not updated that standard to reflect the modern military ATC environment. When the 1978 OPM classification standard was issued, the FAA was the only agency that employed civilian ATC specialists. In September 1980, Congress recognized the DoW civilian ATC specialists as part of the ATC workforce with an amendment to 5 U.S.C. § 2109. However, according to data provided by the Defense Manpower Data Center, the DoW did not hire civilian ATC specialists until June 2004.¹⁹ Therefore, the OPM-developed 1978 OPM classification standard was intended only for FAA GS-2152 positions and not for the DoW. Additionally, in 1996, Congress allowed the FAA to create its own personnel management system, which exempted the FAA from title 5 and the use of the 1978 OPM classification standard for ATC specialists.

¹⁹ (U) The Defense Manpower Data Center is responsible for gathering personnel, manpower, training, financial, and other data to support the DoW's information management needs.

(U) Because the FAA is no longer required to follow the 1978 OPM classification standard, the DoW is the sole user of that standard for grade level determinations.²⁰ To address the outdated and non-applicable aspects of the existing classification standard, in 2022 the Services attempted to request, through DCPAS, that OPM revise the standard. However, they received feedback from DCPAS officials that DCPAS was unable to support submitting the proposed revision to OPM. In 2023, the Services again attempted to revise the 1978 OPM classification standard, but a DCPAS official communicated that due to manpower limitations OPM was no longer issuing revised standards and would not be open to this request. Most recently, in 2025, the functional community proposed to the DASW(CPP) interim courses of action and long-term solutions to address ATC challenges, noting that the first priority is revising the 1978 OPM classification standard. As of April 2026, the functional community, DCPAS, and DASW (CPP)'s efforts to implement interim courses of action and long-term solutions are still ongoing. Specifically, a DCPAS official is reviewing policies regarding additional pay for ATC specialists and DASW(CPP) plans to work with an OPM Chief Human Capital Officers Council official to prioritize the rewrite of the 1978 OPM classification standard.

(U) According to the Classifier's Handbook, OPM has a role in conducting occupational studies and writing new standards. Reports from agencies, the identification of new occupations, and analysis of personnel management problems and trends all drive this effort by determining the agency's needs and priorities. Under OPM guidance and oversight, an agency may develop a standard for an occupation specific to that agency. Since Congress exempted the FAA from title 5 grading requirements through legislation, the FAA adopted its own personnel management system in 1996. Therefore, the DoW has been the only Federal agency using the 1978 OPM classification standard for ATC specialists since 1996. However, OPM hasn't updated the standard to include the DoW ATC specialists' unique responsibilities or the changes in the military ATC environment over the past 48 years. To improve recruitment and retention, the DoW should consider legislative action to allow for flexibility in recruiting and retaining ATC specialists. Additionally, OPM must update the standard to ensure accurate grade levels for ATC specialists and address compensation inequities.

²⁰ (U) According to FAA officials, although the FAA is exempt from title 5 and does not use the classification standard for grade determination, the FAA still utilizes OPM classification and qualification standards for most positions to determine series, titles, and reference materials.

(U) Recommendation 1: We recommend that the Under Secretary of War for Personnel and Readiness evaluate the need for legislative action to allow for flexibility in recruiting and retaining air traffic control specialists and issue a formal decision memorandum detailing the planned course of action.

(U) Recommendation 2: We recommend that the Under Secretary of War for Personnel and Readiness, in consultation with the Office of Personnel Management, develop a plan with milestones for implementation to update the grade level determination guidance of the “Position Classification Standard for Air Traffic Control Series, (GS-2152),” TS-31, June 1978, to better reflect the complexities of DoW air traffic control specialists.

(U) The DoW Did Not Have Centralized Oversight of the Services’ Grade Level Determination Processes

(U) DoW officials did not centrally oversee how the Services determined grade levels for ATC specialists, leading to inconsistent grade level determinations across the Army, Marine Corps, Navy, and Air Force. According to PBFA officials, “There is not a DoD organization that centrally manages ATC.” Instead, “each military service uses this guidance [DASW(CPP)’s general force management guidance] to recruit, train, and manage their civilian air traffic controller workforce.” According to a DASW(CPP) official, if the DoW is experiencing challenges with recruiting or retaining ATC specialists, the DoW Air Operations Functional Community can perform analyses of Services’ staffing issues and present the root cause to the Under Secretary of War for Personnel and Readiness for consultation with OPM. However, according to a 2024 memorandum, the functional community is a facilitator between the Services and provides strategic oversight but cannot impose new civilian human capital requirements on the Services.²¹

(U) Another contributing factor to the inconsistent grade level determination is the Services’ inconsistent use of ATC subject matter experts (SMEs) in the classification process. In their March 2022 draft update to the 1978 OPM classification standard, the Army, Marine Corps, Navy, and Air Force ATC specialists proposed a requirement that an ATC SME validate the classification factors for every position within an ATC facility. The draft update also recommended that the SME possess enough information on the specific airfield and ATC facility to accurately assess the complexity and workload factors. According to the OPM Classifier’s Handbook, OPM prepares classification

²¹ (U) Department of the Air Force, Memorandum for Chief Talent Management Officer, Department of Defense, “Request to Establish the Department of the Air Force as the DoD Cross-Functional Air Operations Community Authority,” November 20, 2024.

(U) standards on the assumption that classifiers are either personnel specialists or managers trained in how to classify positions and knowledgeable about the occupations and organizations concerned. However, according to Army, Navy, and Air Force officials, their classification process does not specifically include ATC SMEs in determining the grade level, which has led to inconsistent grade level determinations.²² Therefore, requiring centralized DoW oversight of the Army, Marine Corps, Navy, and Air Force's grade level determinations and the use of SMEs in the classification process would ensure the appropriate application of factors to result in consistent and correct ATC specialist classification decisions.

(U) Recommendation 3: We recommend that the Under Secretary of War for Personnel and Readiness develop guidance that aids Service personnel in consistently applying the Office of Personnel Management's revised Position Classification Standard for Air Traffic Control Series (GS-2152) and appropriate air traffic control subject matter experts to determine the grade levels of DoW air traffic control specialists.

(U) Recommendation 4: We recommend that the Under Secretary of War for Personnel and Readiness designate an organization responsible for ensuring that the Services consistently apply the Office of Personnel Management's revised Position Classification Standard for Air Traffic Control Series (GS-2152) during the grade level determination process for DoW air traffic control specialist positions.

(U) Civilian ATC Workforce Challenges Caused Shortages and Decreased Readiness

(~~CUI~~) As a result of challenges managing and sustaining their civilian ATC workforce, the Services are experiencing shortages and having difficulty recruiting ATC specialists which hinders DoW mission readiness. [REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

Table 3 shows the Services' current civilian ATC shortages and retirement eligibility, as of January 1, 2026.

²² (U) According to a Marine Corps Manpower and Reserve Affairs official, while the human resource specialists consult with supervisors for subject matter expertise during the classification process, the human resource specialist makes the final decision.

(U) Table 3. Services' Civilian ATC Specialist Shortages and Future Retirements, as of January 1, 2026

(CUI) Service	Authorized ATC Specialists	On-Hand ATC Specialists	Vacant Positions	Current Vacancy Rate	ATC Specialists Eligible for Retirement
[REDACTED]	[REDACTED]	[REDACTED]	[REDACTED]	[REDACTED]	[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]	[REDACTED]	[REDACTED]	[REDACTED]	[REDACTED]	[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]	[REDACTED]	[REDACTED]	[REDACTED]	[REDACTED]	[REDACTED]
Air Force	913	734	179	20%	51
Total	[REDACTED]	[REDACTED]	[REDACTED]	[REDACTED]	[REDACTED] (CUI)

(U) Source: The DoW OIG, based on data from the Army, Marine Corps, Navy, and Air Force.

(CUI) The DoW's strategic goals of lethality, readiness, and homeland defense, detailed in the Secretary of War's memorandum, "Message to the Force," January 27, 2025, and the 2026 National Defense Strategy, are hindered by experienced shortages of ATC specialists. Specifically, the 2026 National Defense Strategy's first line of effort is to defend the U.S. Homeland, which includes defending our nation's skies and focusing on countering unmanned aerial threats. The ATC workforce shortages negatively impact aviation safety and mission readiness across the Services, leading to reduced ATC services, limited facility hours, and even facility closures. [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] Air Force officials reported that shortages have limited airfield hours, reduced airspace availability, and forced closure of critical safety functions, delaying pilot production and training. At Eglin AFB, shortages created risks to aircraft and airfield maintenance and caused overseas mission delays. [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] According to an official from the DoW Air Operations Functional Community, while recruitment and retention incentives offer some relief and ease ATC specialist shortages, the DoW must update the 1978 OPM standard to compete with FAA pay and resolve DoW ATC specialist shortages. To maintain its warfighting advantage and align with its strategic priorities, the DoW must address these civilian ATC shortages to improve the Department's overall readiness and lethality.

(U) DoW Air Operations Functional Community Comments on the Finding and Our Response

(U) Although not required to comment, the DoW Air Operations Cross-Functional Manager suggested modifying the report's opening section to clearly articulate the purpose and origin of the evaluation—noting that the draft report incorrectly implied that the Air Force initiated the request—and recommended making a specific edit to highlight how the shortage of ATC specialists hinders mission readiness.

(U) Our Response

(U) We acknowledge the comments from the DoW Air Operations Cross-Functional Manager and revised the opening paragraph to clearly articulate the evaluation's purpose. Additionally, we incorporated the requested change in the executive summary to explicitly state that the shortage of ATC specialists hinders mission readiness.

(U) Recommendations and Management Comments

(U) Under Secretary of War for Personnel and Readiness

(U) Recommendation 1

(U) We recommend that the Under Secretary of War for Personnel and Readiness evaluate the need for legislative action to allow for flexibility in recruiting and retaining air traffic control specialists and issue a formal decision memorandum detailing the planned course of action.

(U) Management Comments

(U) The Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary of War for Manpower and Reserve Affairs, responding for the Under Secretary of War for Personnel and Readiness, agreed and stated that the DoW will evaluate whether legislative action is necessary to recruit and retain ATC specialists and whether existing authorities and pay options are being effectively used. The evaluation will inform the DoW's next steps and ability to take appropriate action.

(U) Our Response

(U) Comments from the Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary addressed the specifics of the recommendation; therefore, it is resolved but will remain open. We will close this recommendation when the DoW conducts the evaluation and provides a formal decision memorandum detailing the planned course of action.

(U) Under Secretary of War for Personnel and Readiness, in Consultation with the Office of Personnel Management

(U) Recommendation 2

(U) We recommend that the Under Secretary of War for Personnel and Readiness, in consultation with the Office of Personnel Management, develop a plan with milestones for implementation to update the grade level determination guidance of the "Position Classification Standard for Air Traffic Control Series (GS-2152)," TS-31, June 1978, to better reflect the complexities of DoW air traffic control specialists.

(U) Management Comments

(U) The Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary of War for Manpower and Reserve Affairs, responding for the Under Secretary of War for Personnel and Readiness, agreed and stated that the DoW will consult with OPM to develop an implementation plan consistent with the recommendations. Specifically, DASW(CPP) supports

(U) the Department of the Air Force, in coordination with DCPAS, in updating the classification standards to modernize and accurately capture the scope and complexity of DoW ATC positions. After this internal review is complete, the DASW(CPP) will submit a formal request to OPM to update the ATC classification standards.

(U) Our Response

(U) Comments from the Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary addressed the specifics of the recommendation; therefore, it is resolved but will remain open. We will close this recommendation when the Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary of War for Manpower and Reserve Affairs, in coordination with OPM, provides a plan with milestones for implementation to update the grade level determination guidance to better reflect the complexities of DoW ATC specialists.

(U) Under Secretary of War for Personnel and Readiness

(U) Recommendation 3

(U) We recommend that the Under Secretary of War for Personnel and Readiness develop guidance that aids Service personnel in consistently applying the Office of Personnel Management's revised Position Classification Standard for Air Traffic Control Series (GS-2152) and appropriate air traffic control subject matter experts to determine the grade levels of DoW air traffic control specialists.

(U) Management Comments

(U) The Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary of War for Manpower and Reserve Affairs, responding for the Under Secretary of War for Personnel and Readiness, partially agreed and stated that the Department agrees with consistently applying grade level determination guidance; however, the DoW cannot implement the OPM's revised Position Classification Standard for Air Traffic Control Series (GS-2152) until OPM approves the standard. However, the Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary stated that they are committed to working with OPM to revise the standards, and upon OPM's revision of the classification standards, DoW concurs with the recommendation regarding consistent application. Specifically, the DoW will work with Components to develop uniform guidance and ensure consistent application.

(U) Our Response

(U) Comments from the Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary addressed the specifics of the recommendation; therefore, it is resolved but will remain open. We will close this recommendation when the Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary provides the

(U) Services with guidance that aids in the consistent application of the revised OPM Position Classification Standard for Air Traffic Control Series (GS-2152) and appropriate ATC SMEs to determine the grade levels of DoW ATC specialists.

(U) Under Secretary of War for Personnel and Readiness

(U) Recommendation 4

(U) We recommend that the Under Secretary of War for Personnel and Readiness designate an organization responsible for ensuring that the Services consistently apply the Office of Personnel Management's revised Position Classification Standard for Air Traffic Control Series (GS-2152) during the grade level determination process for DoW air traffic control specialist positions.

(U) Management Comments

(U) The Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary of War for Manpower and Reserve Affairs, responding for the Under Secretary of War for Personnel and Readiness, agreed and stated that an organization will be tasked with providing policy oversight on applying the OPM Position Classification Standard for ATC Series during the grade level determination process for DoW ATC specialist positions.

(U) Our Response

(U) Comments from the Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary addressed the specifics of the recommendation; therefore, it is resolved but will remain open. We will close this recommendation when the Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary provides documentation demonstrating that the DoW has designated an organization responsible for ensuring that the Services consistently apply classification standards during the grade level determination process for DoW ATC specialist positions.

(U) Under Secretary of War for Personnel and Readiness

MANPOWER AND
RESERVE AFFAIRS

OFFICE OF THE ASSISTANT SECRETARY OF WAR
1500 DEFENSE PENTAGON
WASHINGTON, D.C. 20301-1500

JUN 24 2026

MEMORANDUM FOR DIRECTOR, OFFICE OF THE INSPECTOR GENERAL

SUBJECT: Response to the Recommendations in Department of War Office of the Inspector General Draft Report, "Evaluation of the DoW Air Traffic Control Workforce" (Project Number D2025-DEV0HA-0124.000)

This memorandum responds to your recommendations for the Under Secretary of War for Personnel and Readiness (USW(P&R)) outlined in the draft report, "Evaluation of the DoW Air Traffic Control Workforce," Project Number (No.) D2025-DEV0HA-0124.000.

Recommendation 1: Evaluate the need for legislative action to allow for flexibility in recruiting and retaining Air Traffic Control (ATC) specialists and issue a formal decision memorandum detailing the planned course of action.

I concur with this recommendation. The Department of War (DoW) acknowledges the ongoing challenges in recruiting and retaining ATC specialists. The DoW will evaluate whether legislative action is necessary to enhance recruitment and retention of ATC specialists and whether existing authorities and pay options are being used effectively. The evaluation will inform the Department's next steps and ability to take appropriate action.

Recommendation 2: In consultation with the U.S. Office of Personnel Management (OPM), develop a plan with milestones for implementation to update the grade level determination guidance of the 1978 OPM Position Classification Standard for ATC Series, (General Schedule (GS) 2152) to better reflect the complexities of DoW ATC specialists.

I concur with this recommendation. The Department recognizes that the 1978 OPM Position Classification Standard for the Air Traffic Control (ATC) Series (GS-2152) may not accurately reflect the current operational environment and complexities faced by DoW ATC specialists. DoW will consult with OPM to develop an implementation plan consistent with this recommendation.

To address this concern, the Deputy Assistant Secretary of War for Civilian Personnel Policy (DASW(CPP)) supports the Department of Air Force in updating the classification standards, in coordination with the Defense Civilian Personnel Advisory Service (DCPAS), to modernize and accurately capture the scope and complexity of DoW ATC positions. Once this internal review is complete, DASW(CPP) will submit a formal request for OPM to update the ATC classification standards.

**(U) Under Secretary of War for Personnel
and Readiness (cont'd)**

Recommendation 3: Develop guidance that aids Service personnel in consistently applying the revised OPM Position Classification Standard for ATC Series (GS-2152) and appropriate ATC subject matter experts to determine the grade levels of DoW ATC specialists.

I partially concur with this recommendation. The Department agrees that the consistent application of grade-level determination guidance is essential to promote uniformity and fairness across DoW ATC positions. However, DoW cannot implement a revised OPM Position Classification Standard for ATC Series (GS-2152) until OPM approves the revised classification standard. As this is completely dependent on OPM's action, I can only partially concur. We are committed to working with OPM to revise the classification standards and will provide any necessary information and resources to support.

Upon OPM's revision of the classification standards, DoW concurs with the recommendation regarding consistent application. While the DoW Components have delegated classification authority and are responsible for developing implementing guidance within their respective organizations, DoW will work with components to develop uniform guidance and ensure consistent application.

Recommendation 4: Designate an organization responsible for ensuring that the Services consistently apply the revised OPM Position Classification Standard for ATC Series (GS-2152) during the grade level determination process for DoW ATC specialist positions.

I concur with this recommendation. An organization tasked with providing policy oversight on the application of OPM Position Classification Standard for ATC Series (GS-2152) during the grade level determination process by the Services will ensure consistency.

For more information, my point of contact is [REDACTED] Deputy Assistant Secretary of War for Civilian Personnel Policy, at [REDACTED]



Joseph P. Morici
Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary of War
for Manpower and Reserve Affairs

(U) Department of the Air Force



DEPARTMENT OF THE AIR FORCE
HEADQUARTERS UNITED STATES AIR FORCE
WASHINGTON DC

5 May 2026

MEMORANDUM FOR DEPARTMENT OF WAR INSPECTOR GENERAL

FROM: DoW Air Operations Cross-Functional Community

SUBJECT: DoW Air Operations Functional Community Response to DoW Office of Inspector General Draft Report, "Evaluation of the DoW Air Traffic Control Workforce" (Project No. D2025- DEV0HA-0124.000)

This is the DoW Air Operations Cross-Functional Community (AO FC) response to the DoW Office of Inspector General (DoW OIG) draft report, "Evaluation of the DoW Air Traffic Control Workforce" (Project No. D2025- DEV0HA-0124.000). The AO FC partially concurs with comment the report as written and welcomes the opportunity to provide comments on areas of technical accuracy and clarity.

Comment 1: AO FC believes the opening section under Executive Summary, Why We Did This Evaluation, does not clearly articulate why or who requested the evaluation. Furthermore, without this clarity the report opening indicates the Air Force was the driving force behind the report's origination, which is not the case. **RECOMMENDATION:** State the reason this report was requested. For example, "Recent Air Traffic Control and Aircraft accidents highlighted the need to evaluate the DoW's use of civilian Air Traffic Controllers."

Comment 2: PDF page two, paragraph one, first line, change to read, "A shortage of air traffic control (ATC) specialists within the DoW is hindering mission readiness."

3. My point of contact is [REDACTED], Air Operations Functional Community Action Officer, DoW Air Operations Functional Community, [REDACTED].

DUDLEY.TRENT.O. Digitally signed by
 [REDACTED] DUDLEY.TRENT.O.
 Date: 2026.05.05 11:44:47 -04'00'
 TRENT O. DUDLEY, SES, DAF
 Director of Operations Integration (AF/A31)
 DoW Air Operations Cross-Functional Manager

cc:

AF/A33
 AF/A34
 AFPC/DPZCS

(U) Appendix A: Project Overview

(U) Objective

(U) The objective of this evaluation was to assess the effectiveness of the DoW's management of the DoW air traffic control (ATC) workforce. This evaluation focused on the classification of the civilian ATC specialist positions across the DoW.

(U) Project Timeline and Professional Standards

(U) We conducted this evaluation from July 2025 through April 2026 in accordance with the "Quality Standards for Inspection and Evaluation," published in December 2020 by the Council of Inspectors General on Integrity and Efficiency. Those standards require that we adequately plan the evaluation to ensure that objectives are met and that we perform the evaluation to obtain sufficient, competent, and relevant evidence to support the findings, conclusions, and recommendations. We believe that the evidence obtained was sufficient, competent, and relevant to lead a reasonable person to sustain the findings, conclusions, and recommendations.

(U) Scope and Methodology

(U) To address the objective of this evaluation, we examined the following policies and procedures:

- (U) Sections 2109 and 5104, title 5, United States Code
- (U) OPM TS-31, "Position Classification Standard for Air Traffic Control Series, GS-2152," June 1978
- (U) OPM TS-107, "The Classifier's Handbook," August 1991
- (U) DoD Directive 5030.19, "DoD Responsibilities on Federal Aviation," March 6, 2023
- (U) DoD Instruction 1400.25, Volume 331, "DoD Civilian Personnel Management System: Civilian Air Traffic Controllers," January 26, 2015
- (U) Army Regulation 95-2, "Air Traffic Control, Airfield/Heliport, and Aerospace Operations," March 31, 2016
- (U) Naval Air Systems Command 00-80T-114, "NATOPS Air Traffic Control Manual," February 1, 2025
- (U) Department of the Air Force Manual 13-204, Volume 3, "Air Traffic Control," April 26, 2024

(U) This evaluation focused on the classification of the civilian ATC specialist positions across the DoW. Although the DoW has military, civilian and contractor ATC specialists, the 1978 OPM classification standard only applies to civilian ATC specialists.

(U) We determined that prioritizing the challenges of managing and sustaining the civilian ATC workforce would be beneficial to address immediate and long-term ATC specialists' gaps and shortages.

(U) We met with stakeholders and obtained documentation to understand the process for determining the grade level of the civilian ATC specialist position, the proposed revisions to OPM guidance, and actions taken to address civilian ATC shortages. Specifically, we coordinated with the following entities.

- (U) Defense Civilian Personnel Advisory Service
- (U) DoW Assistant Secretary of War for Civilian Personnel Policy
- (U) DoW Cross-Functional Air Operations Community
- (U) Assistant Secretary of the Army for Manpower and Reserve Affairs
- (U) Marine Corps Manpower and Reserve Affairs
- (U) Commander, Naval Installations Command
- (U) Air Force Civilian Force Management Directorate

(U) To determine whether the Services consistently applied the 1978 OPM classification standard during the grade level determination process, we analyzed the grade levels assigned to the ATC specialists operating at different types of ATC facilities across the Services. In addition, we conducted interviews and requested documentation supporting the Services' implementation of the 1978 OPM classification standard and the grade level determination process from DoW and Service officials. This information helped us determine DoW's oversight efforts over the Services' implementation of the 1978 OPM classification standard and the grade level determination process. Furthermore, we obtained documentation and data from the Services related to the civilian ATC specialist shortages and the direct mission impacts of those shortages. Specifically, we requested FY 2025 mission impact data caused by civilian ATC specialist shortages.

(U) Security Review Considerations

(U) This report contains information that the DoW has identified as Controlled Unclassified Information (CUI) that is not releasable to the public. As we prepared this final report, we requested that the DoW Components associated with this oversight project review our draft report to identify any mismarked information that should be safeguarded and marked as classified or CUI. We considered any comments the DoW Components provided. If the DoW Components did not provide sufficient details about how to mark or handle their information, we handled the information as unclassified based on the available information and DoW- and Government-wide policies.

(U) Report Contact Information

(U) The DoW OIG Evaluations component produced this report. For questions, please contact Mr. Bryan T. Clark, Assistant Inspector General for Evaluations, Programs, Combatant Commands & Operations, at [REDACTED]

(U) Appendix B: Categories of ATC Facilities

(U) According to the 1978 OPM Classification Standard, the ATC facilities are broken down into four major categories based on the type of control services provided.

- (U) Non-approach control: ATC specialists in the non-approach control facilities are responsible only for air traffic at or in the immediate vicinity of the airport on which the facility is located. This type of facility primarily handles aircraft operating under visual flight rules. At some of these facilities, ATC specialists use radar displays from the parent approach control to supplement visual observations, to aid in sequencing traffic, and to provide air traffic advisories.
- (U) Nonradar approach control: In addition to handling aircraft operating under visual flight rules, ATC specialists provide approach and departure control services, without the use of radar, to aircraft operating under instrument flight rules. In addition to providing ATC for the airport at which the tower is located, this type of facility frequently controls traffic operating to and from one or more adjacent non-approach control airports.
- (U) Limited radar approach: Limited radar approach facilities provide radar approach control services within delegated airspace in the immediate vicinity of the airport, where non-approach control facilities do not have control of airspace.
- (U) Radar approach: This type of facility provides radar control of aircraft operating to or from the primary airport and frequently adjacent airports, and the control of aircraft transiting the area under the control of the facility. Airports served by a radar approach include major air carrier airports as well as airports with significant amounts of traffic.

(U) Acronyms and Abbreviations

AFB	Air Force Base
ATC	Air Traffic Control
DAF	Department of the Air Force
DASW(CPP)	Deputy Assistant Secretary of War for Civilian Personnel Policy (DASW[CPP])
DCPAS	Defense Civilian Personnel Advisory Service
DoT	Department of Transportation
FAA	Federal Aviation Administration
GS	General Schedule
IFR	Instrument Flight Rules
NAS	National Airspace System
OPM	Office Personnel Management
PBFA	Policy Board on Federal Aviation
SME	Subject Matter Expert
VFR	Visual Flight Rules

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