

Report: Federal air safety program falling short

Written by By The Associated Press
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WASHINGTON (AP) — A safety program that encourages air traffic controllers to voluntarily disclose their mistakes in exchange for amnesty from punishment needs significant improvement before it can work effectively, according to a report released Monday.

The program has been FAA's primary answer to the problem of controller errors that bring planes dangerously close together. It encourages greater reporting of mistakes by promising not to punish controllers who disclose errors within 24 hours of an incident as long as the errors aren't the result of gross negligence. The idea is to use the data gathered to better spot safety trends and take corrective action.

The program — which FAA began to phase-in in 2008 — had collected more than 41,000 reports as of the end of last year, showing "promise as a tool to promote increased safety reporting," the report by the Transportation Department's inspector general said.

But the FAA has only recently developed processes to analyze the data that has been amassed, the report said. Also, due to program rules designed to protect the confidentiality of controllers who file reports, much of the data collected isn't verified for accuracy, the report said.

And, the agency hasn't fully developed a process to effectively share the data that's been collected with individual air traffic control facilities around the country so that local improvements can be made, the report said.

The FAA "will need to make significant improvements" before the program "will be able to effectively identify and address the root causes of safety risks," the report said.

In one case cited by the inspector general, the program accepted a report from a controller who was watching a movie while on duty, protecting the controller from punishment.

"We consider this a conduct issue that requires management attention rather than a safety issue appropriate for a confidential safety program," the report said.

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Mistakes and misconduct by air traffic controllers drew attention last year after a plane carrying first lady Michelle Obama was allowed to fly too close to a cargo jet and controllers at several airport towers and other facilities were caught sleeping on the job.

FAA spokeswoman Brie Sachse, responding to the report, called the program "an effective safety tool" that has allowed the agency "to take swift, corrective action and enhance skills in the workforce."

The National Air Traffic Controllers Association also disagreed with the inspector general's conclusions, saying the program has successfully identified and fixed local and systemic safety problems.

"While there is always room for improvement, the ... program is a major leap forward," the union said in a statement. "It has boosted the number of reports of problems filed with federal authorities and increased the resolution rate of safety issues around the country. This is a direct result of the robust and comprehensive data analysis processes currently in place."

The union has worked closely with FAA officials on the design and implementation of the program. A three-member committee consisting of two FAA officials and a union official decide which error reports to into the program. The rules of the program require their decisions be unanimous.

While controllers who report errors aren't punished, FAA managers can recommend controllers to take additional training to improve their skills. The committee can accept, reject or modify those recommendations.

In a case cited in the report, the committee rejected a manager's recommendation that a controller responsible for a Boeing 737 airliner and a small plane coming dangerously close together receive additional training. The committee said the recommendation wasn't justified because the controller lacked a history of making errors. But the controller had only been directing air traffic in that particular airspace sector for eight days, making it unlikely there would be any performance history.