

# Why Iowans should care about a pilot shortage

For the fourth consecutive month, The Eastern Iowa Airport has enjoyed record-breaking passenger numbers. To date, 4.6 percent more passengers have passed through the airport than during the same months last year — and 2017 was a record year.

The airport, located in Cedar Rapids, serves 30 percent of Iowa's total air passenger volume, and handles nearly 45 percent of Iowa's air cargo volume. National forecasts predict an uptick in summer air travel between 3 and 4 percent. These are impressive statistics for our facility as well as the entire region, and we thank each of you who chose The Eastern Iowa Airport.

But these positive numbers obscure a seriously negative trend.

In the last two years, all air service was lost in 20 U.S. communities. And, an additional 26 communities have lost 75 percent of their air service. Why are these airports no longer connected? In part, because of a growing pilot shortage.

By 2021, the national system is forecast to be short 5,000 pilots. Without those pilots, 500 aircraft will no longer fly. The pilot workforce shortage swells to nearly 15,000 by 2026, which means nearly 1,500 grounded aircraft.

Iowans should be concerned because 79 percent of our air service is on regional airlines, which are the primary source of newly hired pilots for mainline carriers. In other words, airlines that serve Iowa have the most acute shortage of pilots. According to the Regional Airline Association, by 2020 the national cumulative pilot need will equal the organization's entire pilot workforce.

Iowa's air transportation system consists of eight commercial service airports. Six are classified as nonhub and two — Des Moines and our facility in Cedar Rapids — are small hubs. To some extent, every airport in the state will be negatively impacted by the pilot shortage. Communities that cannot support aircraft with 76 seats or more are especially vulnerable. Smaller aircraft, like the turboprops and small regional jets that provide most of Iowa's service, are no longer being manufactured. Last year, turboprop departures were down nationally by 31.5 percent, and 37- to 50-seat regional jet aircraft departures were down 7.5 percent.

In addition, if a community loses so much service that the airport no longer enplanes 10,000 passengers a year, Federal Aviation Administration funding goes away. That can be as much as \$1 million annually leaving the community. We all depend on these federal investments to maintain a strong air transportation system.

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Finally, our state's key economic drivers tell us air service is critically important. [A recent study](#) suggests flights are more important than high-tech industries and as important as a highly educated workforce. Iowa's largest employers say commercial air service is among the top three issues influencing business expansion and relocation.

Some efforts have been implemented to address pilot shortages. Regional airline pilot pay is higher than ever. But even as pay increases, so does the shortfall of pilots. We have learned that money won't fly an airplane.

Other solutions deserve consideration. The FAA has the authority to approve additional pilot training pathways. Unfortunately, due to the politically charged nature of the issue, the FAA won't take action without a directive from Congress.

Pilot training is expensive, but not eligible for traditional student financial aid and education loans. We need to make training more accessible, the way we have for traditional colleges and vocational schools. Pilot training also needs to be modernized and based on data-driven principles, to move prospective pilots safely and efficiently through their education. Those in the aviation business need to encourage more young people to consider the profession.

Most important, the entire industry needs to come together and work with government to address the problem. We cannot afford to see this as a competitive issue, pitting airlines and airports against each other.

We can make a difference, and this is no time for "Iowa nice." We must talk openly and candidly about the economic impact of this growing problem. We need direct involvement from Iowa's congressional delegation, community development leaders, state and local elected officials and airports. We need more voices.

Iowa's economy demands a strong and robust commercial air service system. The time to act is now. Contact your elected representatives and urge them to help solve the national pilot shortage problem.

- Marty Lenss is director of The Eastern Iowa Airport.

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