

## FAA Aeromedical Modernization

Passenger demand for travel post-Covid has exceeded expectations of many airline industry analysts. The demand surge has created a temporary shortfall of available airline pilots due to training capacity restraints. The airline industry has responded with training capacity increases and financial assistance programs for student pilots. These measures should serve to normalize airline pilot demand over the next few years.

Every licensed pilot in the United States from private pilot to airline pilot is required to hold a Federal Aviation Administration (FAA)-issued medical certificate, granted after an FAA flight physical examination. This examination is performed by a physician who is FAA-trained, designated, and certified as an AME (Aviation Medical Examiner). An airline pilot's career, while rewarding, comes with the risk of abruptly losing this required medical qualification needed to continue to fly due to unforeseen medical issues that may arise throughout that pilot's career. At every major and regional airline there are a significant percentage of pilots who lose their medical qualification status and are sidelined while receiving medical treatment. After completing medical treatment when ready to fly again, pilots must begin a process with the FAA to submit a medical application to requalify and return to flying status.

There is a group of experienced airline pilots that have been overlooked, but who are eager to be available to fly again. At American Airlines alone, there are approximately 700 or more pilots on Long Term Disability (LTD). Those are pilots who have experienced a medical condition disqualifying them from retaining a current medical certificate. A significant segment of those 700+ pilots are at different stages of the process; attempting to submit or have submitted their medical applications to the FAA's Office of Aerospace Medicine (OAM) to regain their medical certificate. The OAM requires a pilot to submit extensive amounts of documentation to review and determine whether a pilot can retain a medical certificate.

After all documentation requests have been submitted and a pilot's application for a medical certificate filed with the FAA's OAM office, pilots are encountering extensive unexplained delays in the approval or denial of their medical certificate. *Delays can run for six months or longer before the pilot applicant's file is even reviewed by the OAM's office.* To aid in the post-Covid temporary pilot shortfall in the Airline industry, there is a significant need to establish **fair and reasonable time limits** on FAA OAM's recertification decisions for medical certificates.

Congress recently passed the **FAA Reauthorization Act of 2024** (HR 3935), which was signed into law on May 16, 2024. Sections 411 and 413 of the legislation deal directly with modernizing and improving the FAA Office of Aerospace Medicine (OAM). Pilots who have needed a special issuance from the OAM know the current process can be cumbersome and lacks accountability and transparency. Until 2024, correspondence with the OAM relied on paper mail, leading to delays in communication, and difficulty for pilots in determining the status of their application. Clear standards for special issuances are lacking, and when a pilot receives an application denial, the ability to appeal that decision is limited. Even with the assistance of the APA Aeromedical Department, pilots often wait far too long for a decision.

APA was directly involved in crafting two sections of the FAA Reauthorization Act of 2024 that will significantly improve this process. Section 411 establishes a modernization working group to review the FAA's medical processes, policies, and procedures — including those surrounding special issuances — and to make



recommendations “to ensure timely and efficient certification of airmen.” This working group will also review mental health protocols and medications to ensure pilots are not disincentivized from seeking effective mental health treatment.

Section 413 of the bill requires the modernization working group to establish a medical portal modernization task group to evaluate the user interface and information-sharing capabilities of an online medical portal administered by the FAA. This online portal will enable digital communication between pilots and the OAM and allow pilots to monitor their application’s progress through the approval process.

Notwithstanding the timelines in Sections 411 and 413, APA is advocating for the prompt establishment of these working groups. We have assured lawmakers that getting pilots off the disabled list and back to flying is a “win-win-win”: a win for the pilot who can go back to earning a full paycheck, a win for the company that no longer must pay out disability, and a win for travelers, who can rest assured there are highly qualified and experienced pilots at the controls. And finally, we all understand that a more enlightened approach to pilot mental health is long overdue.

The FAA Reauthorization Act of 2024 also includes provisions that call for the creation of an Airman’s Medical Bill of Rights, improvements to the designee misconduct reporting process, and improvements to the designee locator tool, among other welcome enhancements.

The Allied Pilots Association welcomes these long overdue efforts by Congress to modernize an antiquated Office of Aerospace Medicine to help all of our nation’s pilots. We look forward to seeing the results of the task force soon.

For questions or additional information please email [GAC-Chairman@alliedpilots.org](mailto:GAC-Chairman@alliedpilots.org)