

## Disability advocates fear backlash, discrimination after Trump's FAA comments

Veterans' groups and advocates for those with disabilities have issued scathing criticisms of the president's baseless comments about the reasons behind the fatal plane crash last week.

Yesterday at 1:21 p.m. EST

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By [Brianna Tucker](#) and [Praveena Somasundaram](#)

Advocate groups, outraged at President Donald Trump's baseless suggestion that the deadly plane crash near Reagan National Airport was a result of hiring people with disabilities, fear his comments will spark discrimination and misunderstandings about disability hiring laws.

Paralyzed Veterans of America, a nonprofit group that advocates for veterans with catastrophic disabilities and spinal cord injuries, issued a scalding response Thursday afternoon, calling the president's remarks "shameful" and "disrespectful to [veterans'] service and contributions to America's greatness."

"As an Army veteran who spent many nighttime hours in a Blackhawk and who incurred a combat-related spinal cord injury in service to this country, I can speak with authority when I say that veterans and all people with disabilities are dedicated, highly skilled, and fully qualified to tackle the most difficult jobs possible," the group's chief executive, Carl Blake, said [in the statement](#).

During a White House news conference Thursday, Trump said the Federal Aviation Administration is "actively recruiting workers who suffer severe intellectual disabilities, psychiatric problems, and other mental and physical conditions" under its diversity, equity and inclusion hiring initiative. He read off a "targeted disabilities" list — "hearing, vision, missing extremities, partial paralysis, complete paralysis, epilepsy, severe intellectual disability, psychiatric disability and dwarfism" — and asserted that people with those conditions qualify to become air traffic controllers.

Consideration for people with disabilities is a long-standing, government-wide policy that does not apply to hiring air traffic controllers, according to a former FAA official who spoke on the condition of anonymity.

In social media posts and media comments, Trump cited no evidence for his claims and has not backed down from them since, even as investigators have not made any conclusions about the cause of the crash.

At least a dozen groups issued a statement denouncing the president's suggestion that disabled people and diversity policies played a role in the crash that killed 67 people, calling it a broader attack on civil rights and equal opportunity in aviation and government.

"The President is deliberately spreading falsehoods to demonize the quarter of American adults who live with disabilities rather than directing federal resources at ensuring such a devastating tragedy never happens again," Maria Town, president and CEO of the American Association of People With Disabilities, said in the [statement](#). The American Council of the Blind, Autistic Self Advocacy Network, United Spinal Association, Disability Rights Education and Defense Fund, and other disability rights organizations also signed the letter in solidarity.

For decades, federal [laws](#) have prohibited employment discrimination against people with disabilities, including in the federal sector. Those laws protect employees if they can perform the essential functions of a job, said Alison Barkoff, a disability law expert and professor at George Washington University. They also require that federal agencies provide reasonable accommodations to help individuals perform those essential functions.

"If an essential function of the job of someone working in a tower is being able to see the planes coming, of course someone who is blind won't be qualified for that particular job," Barkoff said. "There may be some other job in the FAA, of course, that someone is qualified for, but I think we need to be very clear that there are not unqualified people being hired because of disability laws."

Barkoff added that Trump's comments could create a chilling effect on hiring people with disabilities — "not because they're not competent but because [of] the political rhetoric out there."

The Office of Personnel Management also outlines [eligibility requirements for someone to be initially hired](#) for air traffic controller positions, stating that in general, "air traffic control specialist applicants and employees must have the capacity to perform the essential functions of these positions without risk to themselves or others."

In his early executive orders, Trump has taken a [sweeping and aggressive aim](#) at diversity initiatives within the federal government. Yet it was during his first term that the [FAA debuted](#) the Aviation Development Program to "help prepare people with disabilities for careers in air traffic operations."

The agency in 2019 said it would enroll up to 20 people in the program and "identify specific opportunities" for people with targeted disabilities, the same ones that Trump named on Thursday. One of the first three graduates of the program became an air traffic control trainee in August 2021, [the FAA said in a blog post](#).

Trump on Thursday also attacked his predecessors and Democrats, claiming without evidence that they had lowered hiring standards.

"I put safety first," Trump said. "Obama, Biden and the Democrats put policy first."

Rather than making a fact-based argument, Trump created a "skewed perspective" on the crash with his remarks, said Whitney Phillips, a media studies professor at the University of Oregon.

“Trump is speaking more from a place of gut-level disgust toward liberals, the fight against liberals, than he is actually talking about policy,” Phillips said. “The details are not important to him.”

Trump has been criticized for his public and disparaging comments about disability. At a 2015 campaign rally, Trump mocked a New York Times reporter with a congenital joint condition that affected his arms. The imitation drew severe backlash.

More recently, in July, Fred Trump III, Trump’s nephew whose son William is disabled, recounted publicly an Oval Office conversation in which he recalled the president saying that people with disabilities, “maybe those kinds of people should just die.”

That conversation was the last time he spoke to his uncle, Fred Trump told The Washington Post.

*Isaac Arnsdorf and Glenn Kessler contributed to this report.*