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INSIDE

FBO Today Quarterly Report

Eagles Soar, Harts Explore

Charter Today Quarterly Report

Congress Seeking Legislative Fix to Maintenance Technical Worker Shortage

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The future looks bright for the aviation industry – an FAA bill to provide long-term stability and funding to the agency and its programs is on the horizon; NextGen modernization is in full effect; and the safest air transportation system in the world continues to prevail. However, the workforce shortage is felt on every level, including through a lack of aviation maintenance technicians to service the aircraft our businesses provide and our customers rely on. NATA and other aviation associations in Washington understand the need for skilled aviation technical workers, and are actively working on Capitol Hill to close the gap between supply and demand.

According to a Boeing analysis, 118,000 new technicians will be needed in North America over the next two decades, and the consulting firm Oliver Wyman forecasts that demand for aviation maintenance technicians will outstrip supply by 2022. A recent survey conducted by the Aeronautical Repair Station Association (ARSA) further underscores the need for this legislation - more than 80 percent of respondents reported difficulty finding qualified technicians and more than half of responding companies have unfilled positions. As a result, maintenance companies say it is taking longer to complete work for customers; they are choosing not to add new technical capabilities, and in some cases, are turning down

new business. Also, the incoming workforce is not always aware of the variety of career opportunities available in the aircraft maintenance community. The aircraft maintenance industry believes it is critical that programs be implemented in maintenance schools now, and at every level of education, to promote this vital industry.

To address the shortage, a bipartisan group of representatives and senators have introduced numerous pieces of legislation to update the outdated training programs at aviation maintenance technician schools and establish a pilot program to support the next generation of aviation maintenance technicians. In the House of Representatives, Congressmen Sam Graves (R-MO), Dan Lipinski (D-IL), Markwayne Mullin (R-OK) and Brenda Lawrence (D-MI) introduced H.R. 5701, the Aviation Maintenance Workforce Development Pilot Program, to encourage government, industry and educational institutions to work together to develop technical talent. Administered by the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA), the bill would create a pilot program, offering \$500,000 in grants for aviation maintenance workforce development activities. Grant applications must be jointly submitted by a business or labor organization, school and government entity.

A general aviation pilot himself, Graves highlighted the need for mechanics, noting that all segments of aviation will be affected if more people do not enter the field. Senator James Inhofe (R-OK), in conjunction with other members of the Senate Commerce Committee, introduced similar legislation, but it restricts high school applications – unlike the House bill. “Our aviation industry needs skilled workers and the aviation maintenance industry provides high-paying, high-skilled jobs across the country; we can’t afford to let these skilled jobs go unfilled,” Inhofe stated. Industry is seeking to

include the House bill language, incorporating high school applicants, into the Senate FAA reauthorization bill.

The Senate companion legislation, introduced by Senators Orrin Hatch (R-UT), Maria Cantwell (D-WA), James Inhofe (R-OK) and Richard Blumenthal (D-CT), seeks to modernize training programs at aviation maintenance schools. The bill, S. 2506, requires the FAA to reform the mandated curriculum taught at aviation maintenance technician schools, governed by Part 147 of Title 14 – Code of Federal Regulations, which has not been updated in nearly five decades. “While planes are becoming more sophisticated, the curriculum for aspiring aviation mechanics remains antiquated,” commented co-sponsor Blumenthal. This legislation will relieve industry from the necessity of retraining of aviation maintenance technician graduates to perform basic tasks required to maintain a modern aircraft, bringing “aviation maintenance curriculum into the 21st century,” stated Hatch.

So, what can the aeronautical community do to promote these important pieces of legislation in order to encourage and foster the next generation of aviation maintenance technicians? Urge your members of Congress to support these pieces of legislation that aim to grow the aviation maintenance technician workforce and promote collaboration with industry, businesses and local and federal governments to produce modernized curriculums that support the next generation of aviation technical workers and thousands of jobs across the country. Visit NATA’s Legislative Action Center, www.nata.aero, for more information on these bills and to write your elected officials in support. ■

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