

Air Traffic Controller

One federal employer, one hard test, and a hard age cutoff. Then some of the best pay in government.

TYPICAL PAY

\$148,080

a year, full time

PAY RANGE

\$78k to \$216k

starting to experienced

TIME TO QUALIFY

2 to 5 years

after high school

DEMAND

Moderate

job outlook

LICENCE NEEDED

Yes

regulated job

WHERE YOU WORK

Airport towers, radar approach rooms, en route centers

How you get there

- 1 High school diploma** Grade 12
That is the minimum. You also need to be a United States citizen and speak clearly enough to be understood over a radio.
- 2 Apply during a hiring window** Days
The Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) posts openings on USAJOBS (the federal hiring site), usually once or twice a year and only for a...
- 3 Pass the entrance test** One day
The Air Traffic Skills Assessment (ATSA) tests memory, multitasking, spatial reasoning and judgment under pressure.
- 4 Medical, psychological and security checks** Several months
A full medical, a psychological evaluation and a background investigation. Vision, hearing and drug screening all apply.
- 5 The Academy in Oklahoma City** About 2 to 5 months
Classroom plus simulator training. It is intense and not everyone passes. Fail out and you are released.
- 6 Facility training** 1 to 3 years
On-position training at your assigned tower or center until you certify on every position. Then you are a Certified Professional Controller.

Pros and cons

- + Very high pay with no college debt required
- + Federal pension and early retirement
- + You are trusted with real responsibility from day one on position
- You must be hired before you turn 31, so the window is short
- Rotating shifts, nights, weekends and holidays forever
- High washout rate in training, and you have few fallback options

Optional boosts

Transfer to a busier facility. On-the-job training instructor. Front line manager. Traffic management coordinator.

Good to know

The job has an expiry date

Controllers must retire at 56. Combined with the rule that you have to be hired before your 31st birthday, the whole career is designed to fit inside a fixed window of your life.

The union is nearly 20,000 strong

The National Air Traffic Controllers Association represents close to 20,000 controllers, engineers and other aviation safety professionals across Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) facilities, military fields...

Where these numbers come from

My Next Move: Air Traffic Controllers (53-2021.00)

National Air Traffic Controllers Association

Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University: Air Traffic Management degree

USAJOBS, the federal government's official employment site

Numbers checked September 2026. Pay figures are typical full-time annual amounts in United States dollars, based on Bureau of Labor Statistics wage data and published pay scales. They vary by state, employer and experience. Tuition is for in-state students at public schools unless the card says otherwise. Sources, links and the click-through version: <https://career.help/us/careers/air-traffic-controller>



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