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Report of the Wellbeing Task Force
Presented by Jaco van der

SUMMARY

In April 2024, total of 72 member associations (MAs) participated a survey that provided a broad overview of the global need and demands for mental health and wellbeing interventions. Subsequently a wellbeing framework was developed from the survey results to guide the Wellbeing Task Force (TF) and 4 main streams were established to start collecting and developing material that will assist MAs to implement a level of peer support in their local area or the region.

The TF has collected and developed an array of material to enable MAs or regions to establish peer support during the past year. The next significant step is the healthcare behaviour study that may produce the data that can guide us in engaging regulators and ICAO in setting the scene for pertinent support when needed in the interest of industry safety.

INTRODUCTION

The Wellbeing Task Force was established in October 2023 with four members that discussed the needs and potential future of mental health and wellbeing as an imperative for ATCOs globally. In 2024 the group expanded to 11 members and a survey was hosted during the annual conference in Singapore to better understand the state of Peer Support across MAs. What flowed from this survey and the expansion of the TF is being disused in the rest of this working paper.

The Wellbeing Task Force consist of the following members at present:

- Andrew Le Bovidge   USA
- Bron Sanderson   Australia
- Zeljko Oreski   Croatia
- Marc Baumgartner   Switzerland
- Christian Radu   Romania
- Maicol Parreno   Dominican Republic
- Marija Savikj   North Macedonia
- Saif   India
- Markko Méndez   Mexico
- Bunmy Balogun   Nigeria
- Jaco van der Westhuizen   South Africa

The outcome of the April 2024 survey, also led to the development of a framework depicted in Figure 1, that encapsulates all the aspects of wellbeing and safety that requires attention in various forms depending on the country, region or particular MA.

Figure 1: IFATCA GLOBAL FRAMEWORK FOR MENTAL WELLBEING OF ATCOs
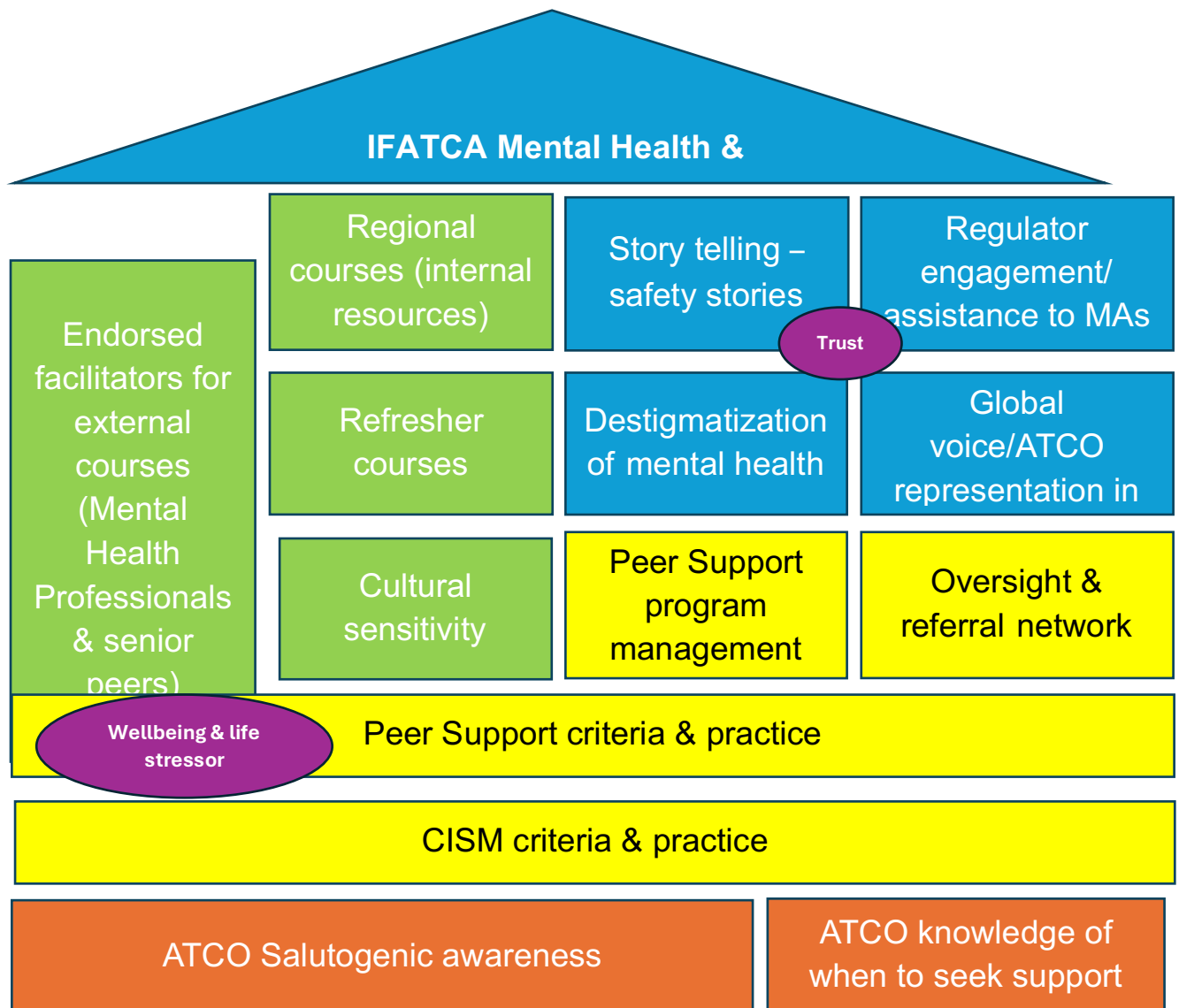
Given the plan for rolling out a wellbeing focus in IFATCA for ATCOs, as captured in Figure 1, the following four streams were created although only three streams are currently active. These are:

- Stream 1: CISM
- Stream 2: Peer Support for wellbeing & life stressors
- Stream 3: Peer Support Program Management
- Stream 4: Awareness, destigmatization and mental health promotion

The work of each of these streams and their associated activities will be discussed separately hereafter.

STREAM 1: CISM

Stream 1 aims to set a standard for Critical Incident Stress Management (CISM) globally, recommending good practices and enabling MAs and ANSPs, where needed, to collaborate in establishing or improving existing CISM structures and support. The stream offers a summary of the current CIS landscape they gathered from their work as an overview. CISM has become an essential program in aviation, particularly for Air Navigation Service Providers (ANSPs) and air traffic controllers (ATCOs). CISM aims to help aviation professionals cope with the psychological impact of work-related critical incidents and maintain their ability to perform their duties safely.

Global Implementation of CISM in Aviation

Europe
In Europe, CISM programs have been widely adopted, particularly among Air Navigation Service Providers (ANSPs). EU Regulation No 2017/373 states that each European ANSP must have established a CISM program since January 2020. EUROCONTROL, a key organisation in European aviation safety, supports implementing CISM programs by providing comprehensive guidelines and training materials. These resources include implementation guidelines, quick reference guides, and video tutorials to assist in planning, promoting, and maintaining CISM programs.

North America
Organisations such as the International Critical Incident Stress Foundation (ICISF) provide CISM training and certification in North America. The ICISF's training is recognised and approved by institutions like the University of Baltimore, ensuring that CISM team members are well-prepared to support distressed aviation professionals.

International Efforts
The International Federation of Air Traffic Controllers Associations (IFATCA) strongly advocates creating and implementing CISM programs globally. IFATCA encourages international cooperation and the development of a network of CISM coordinators to share best practices, training needs, and cross-border intervention strategies. This network aims to provide a forum for CISM coordinators to discuss organisational, budgetary, and training issues, ultimately fostering a more resilient aviation sector.

Training Providers
Various organisations offer specialised CISM training for aviation professionals. For example, GATE Aviation Training provides CISM programs tailored for Air Navigation Service Providers, focusing on establishing and maintaining peer-driven support systems. Similarly, Global Aviators Consulting offers structured CISM training to help individuals and groups manage psychological stress effectively.

The implementation of a CISM program in aviation typically involves several key steps:

- Planning and Preparation: Organisations should develop a comprehensive plan for implementing CISM, including defining objectives, allocating resources, and establishing a timeline.

- Management Support: Gaining support from upper management is crucial for the success of a CISM program. Management should be trained and aware of potential post-incident reactions.

- Peer Selection: CISM programs in aviation are often peer-based. A critical step is selecting and training suitable peers from within the organisation.

- Training: Peers and other involved personnel should receive specialised training in CISM techniques, typically following standards set by organisations like the International Critical Incident Stress Foundation (ICISF).

- Program Structure: Establish a clear structure for the CISM program, including procedures for activation, intervention methods, and follow-up care.

- Promotion and Awareness: Educate staff about the CISM program, its benefits, and how to access support when needed.

- Integration with Existing Systems: Ensure the CISM program is integrated with other organisational safety and human factors initiatives.

Key Components of CISM in Aviation

A comprehensive CISM program in aviation typically includes:
- Rapid Response: Ensuring support is available quickly after a critical incident.
- Peer Support: Trained colleagues providing initial support and intervention.
- Professional Support: Access to mental health professionals when needed.
- Debriefing Sessions: Structured group or individual sessions to process the incident.
- Follow-up Care: Ongoing support and monitoring of affected individuals.
- Debriefing the debriefer: A program to care for debriefers to process critical incident exposure of others.

Implementing CISM in aviation offers several benefits:
- Helps maintain the psychological well-being of aviation professionals.
- Supports safety culture and human performance in air traffic management.
- Potentially reduces long-term impacts of critical incidents, such as Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD).
- Contributes to the overall resilience and effectiveness of the aviation workforce.
- Challenges and Considerations

When implementing CISM in aviation, organisations should be aware of:
- Cultural differences that may affect the acceptance and effectiveness of CISM.
- There is a need for ongoing evaluation and adjustment of the program.
- Ensuring confidentiality and trust in the CISM process.
- Adapting the program to fit the specific needs of different aviation roles (e.g., ATCOs, pilots, ground staff).

Current Status and Future Developments

As of 2025, CISM has transitioned from a pioneering concept to a regulatory obligation in European aviation. The European Plan for Aviation Safety (EPAS) 2025 edition, published by EASA, continues to emphasise the importance of managing safety risks, including those related to stress and human factors.

Additionally, the MESAFE (MEntal health for aviation SAFEty) project has been working to develop support programs for aviation professionals further, building on the foundation laid by earlier regulations such as EU Commission Regulation 2018/1042.

In conclusion, Critical Incident Stress Management has become an integral part of European aviation safety regulations, with a clear trend towards more comprehensive and mandatory implementation across the industry. These regulations and guidelines reflect the growing recognition of stress's impact on aviation safety and the need for structured support systems

for aviation professionals. It is the aim pf this TF to expand this reach to other continents and countries. One of the first steps is the healthcare avoidance study that is launched at the conference that can provide the credible research publications to foster further debate with aviation medical fraternity and regulators.

STREAM 2: PEER SUPPORT FOR LIFE STRESSORS
Possible adaptation of PSPs for ATCOs aligning with existing CISM

To adapt aviation Peer Support Programs (PPSPs) for air traffic controllers (ATCOs) while aligning them with existing Critical Incident Stress Management (CISM) programs, the following approach can be taken:

The CISM focus is primarily addressing acute stress reactions following critical incidents, such as accidents or emergencies. It provides immediate psychological first aid and debriefing to mitigate post-traumatic stress.
- **PSP Focus:** Broader scope, targeting ongoing mental health and wellbeing issues, such as anxiety, depression, or occupational stress, beyond critical incidents.
- **Integration:** PSPs can complement CISM by offering long-term peer-based support and pathways to professional help for ATCOs facing sustained or recurring challenges.

By combining the immediate benefits of CISM with the long-term focus of PSPs, air traffic controllers can receive comprehensive mental health support that aligns with ICAO standards while addressing their unique operational challenges. This possible approach is developed in a separate document.

Moreover, in some parts of the world, such as Australia, a single definition is used for critical incidents whereby peer debriefers are trained to provide support in all forms of stressors that range from work-related incidents to training challenges or personal trauma or general stressors such as illness of a close relative or as mentioned anxiety challenges due to life changes.

From an aviation industry point of view in Germany and in South Africa, the model is split in two and distinguish between CISM for work-related incidents and life stressor support with two different approaches trained for Peer Support Volunteers. There is no single right answer, however, it is paramount that suitably experienced trainers are used (preferably psychologists with an aviation background or understanding) to enable containment and successful grounding of any activators that may present itself during training on real life examples of the peer volunteers.

STREAM 3: MANAGEMENT OF A SUPPORT PROGRAMME

To establish a Peer Support Program, some key features need to be considered and put in place. Some of which have been identified below. However, before the identification of some of these key features, it might be necessary to define some terms.

Definition of Key Terms
- **Peer**: A peer is an individual who shares similar characteristics, experiences, or circumstances with others in the group, fostering a sense of relatability and empathy.

- **Peer Support Group**: A Peer Support group is a collective of individuals with shared experiences who offer emotional, social, and practical support, creating a safe and understanding environment for mutual growth and healing.
- **A Peer Support Volunteer** is someone who offers support to others based on their own experiences. This type of support can be informal and non-directive
- **Privacy:** the expectation of an individual that disclosure of personal information is confined to or intended only for the PSP
- **Confidentiality:** is a professional or ethical duty for the PSP to refrain from disclosing information from or about a recipient of Peer Support services, barring any exceptions recommended to be disclosed at the outset
- **Privilege:** is the Legal protection from being compelled to disclose communications in certain protected relationships, such as between attorney and client, doctor and patient, etc.

The Nature of the Peer Support Program

Accessing a Peer Support Program should be voluntary. The concerned colleague should have the exclusive right to decide the mode of Peer Support he/ she requires. The Peer Support Program can either take on a group format or a peer-to-peer format. The first comprises people with similar exposure to an incident or accident, while the second is individualistic in approach.

Characteristics of the Support program
- Open and inclusive: The group should be accessible to individuals who meet established criteria (e.g., shared experience, professional background).
- Confidentiality: A key principle of trust within the program where participants feel safe sharing without fear of exposure or judgement.
- Non-judgmental environment: Program interactions should remain free from criticism, blame, or prejudice, promoting acceptance.
- Voluntary participation: Joining and participating in the program should be entirely voluntary.
- Guided by trained facilitators (where applicable): Trained individuals, often peers themselves, may guide discussions, ensuring productive and respectful interactions.

Expected Benefits of the Support Program
- Emotional Support: Providing a platform or opportunities where members can openly share emotions and experiences without fear or prejudice
- Knowledge and Resource Sharing: Helping peers exchange practical advice, coping strategies, and resources.
- Social Connection: Reducing feelings of isolation by creating meaningful relationships among members.
- Empowerment and Confidence Building: Encouraging members to recognize their strength, potential, and resilience.
- Stress Reduction and Improved Well-being: Facilitating emotional release, stress management, and general mental health improvement.

Objectives of the Support Program
- To create a supportive and safe space for sharing experiences.
- To provide emotional and social support.
- To empower participants by fostering resilience and self-confidence.
- To reduce stigma and isolation through shared understanding.

Basic structure of the support program

- **Leadership/Management**: Define who runs the program. This could include peer leaders, volunteer facilitators, or rotating leadership among members.

Support system
- **Training for facilitators**: Providing training for Peer Volunteers/CISM debriefers is required to enhance their skills in communication, group dynamics, and conflict resolution. Because this is not a common skill applied frequently, refresher training for existing debriefers are required. The frequency of refresher training is proposed at an average interval of 24-months although annual refresher training is better for skills maintenance.
- **External Resources and Partnerships**: Access to mental health professionals, resource materials, and collaborations with organizations offering complementary support.
- **Funding and Logistics Support**: Funding of a CISM or Peer Support program should be established not only as an inaugural event but with planned future training intervals as well as logistical support for program activities (e.g., meeting spaces; catering and break away rooms for practicing debriefing skills).]

Introducing and Promoting the Support Program.
- **Awareness Campaigns**: Use digital and physical channels (flyers, social media, newsletters) to inform potential members about available support.
- **Orientation Sessions**: Host an introductory meeting to explain the purpose, goals, and benefits of the program, allowing operational staff (and managers) to ask questions.
- **Community Partnerships**: Collaborate with community organizations, healthcare professionals, and local entities to further promote the importance of mental health and wellbeing as a critical part of aviation safety.
- **Member Testimonials**: Share stories or testimonies from willing colleagues that experienced such Peer Support to illustrate the program's positive impact and encourage participation.

Common Applications:
Some scenarios or conditions that may require the services of Peer Support include cases involving:
- **Mental Health Support** for individuals dealing with depression, anxiety, PTSD, or other conditions.
- **Substance Recovery Programs** like Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) or Narcotics Anonymous (NA).
- **Workplace Support:** Addressing stress, burnout, or team cohesion.
- **Education**: Helping students/ trainees adapt to academic challenges or personal issues.
- **Healthcare**: Support for individuals managing chronic illnesses or undergoing treatments.

Selection and Deselection Procedures
Provision should be made in writing for the selection procedure of the Peer Support team members. Ideally, PSP volunteers are individuals who are in good standing with their departments, taking into consideration, years on the job, prior disciplinary history and recommendations from other colleagues based on acceptance on the grounds of having the capacity to keep information confidential.
Other considerations include but are not limited to:

- Previous education and Training
- Resolved traumatic experiences
- Desirable personal qualities such as Maturity, judgment, personal and professional ethics, and credibility

Deselection* procedures should also be outlined, for example breach of confidentiality. Peer Support Volunteers should also be provided with the option to take a leave of absence and be encouraged to take this option whenever personal issues or obligations require it to ensure compliance and understanding of policies, it is recommended that volunteers sign an expectation agreement. Noting confidentiality and all exceptions, leave of absence process and deselection criteria.

Role conflict

Peer volunteers should be discouraged from debriefing others when they are not in a healthy space themselves. Moreover, wherever relationships with colleagues exist, peer volunteers or CISM debriefers should refrain from debriefing such delegates for the sake of the program's credibility and their own vulnerability.

STREAM 4: AWARENESS, DESTIGMATIZATION AND MENTAL HEALTH PROMOTION

This stream is responsible for three key areas: raising awareness about mental health and wellbeing, reducing the stigma associated with mental health issues, and promoting and gathering materials to educate Member Associations (MAs) about the importance of mental health. As air traffic control continues to be a high-stress profession, the need for comprehensive mental health support and education has never been more crucial. This working paper outlines the current efforts, progress, and future directions of the IFATCA TF in fulfilling its mandate to improve mental health outcomes for our members.

Document Collection and Management

Stream 4 has established a comprehensive digital repository to store and manage all collected materials related to mental health awareness, destigmatization, and promotion. This repository, named "MWTF DRIVE," is hosted on the IFATCA server and serves as a centralized hub for all current and future resources.

Access and Security

The MWTF DRIVE implements a structured access system to ensure proper control and distribution of materials:

- One representative from each Member Association (MA) is granted access to the drive.
- Moderators have additional privileges to add, edit and manage content.

Folder Structure

The drive is organized to provide easy navigation and access to resources:

- General folders contain widely accessible materials
- One dedicated folder contains sensitive materials with restricted access that can be used for training purposes in smaller groups that can aid further conversations.

This structured approach ensures that valuable mental health resources are securely stored, easily accessible to authorized personnel, and protected from unauthorized modification or

deletion. By centralizing these materials, efficient sharing of knowledge and best practices across Member Associations is made possible, fostering a collaborative approach to mental health awareness and support across MAs.

Collected Social Media Content
The stream has been actively collecting relevant material from various social media platforms, focusing on content that addresses:
- Aviation safety
- Mental wellbeing
- Intersection of both topics

To ensure ethical use and compliance with intellectual property rights, we have obtained written consent from all account holders whose material we utilize.

Original Content Development
In addition to collecting already existing content, the stream has begun creating original materials:
- Our first piece was a Valentine's Day post, which was published in an IFATCA circular and shared across IFATCA's social media platforms;
- Additional materials followed for 8th of March and the international Sleep day;
- More to follow as the year progress.

Strategic Content Calendar
To maintain a consistent and impactful presence, we have:

- Collaborated with the IFATCA world comms team to obtain a comprehensive calendar of mental health-related promotions
- Developed a plan to create awareness - raising content for each significant date
- This approach ensures a steady flow of relevant, timely information to our colleagues throughout the year.

MHTF presence and initiatives
The team brainstormed different approaches to inform MAs about our existence and initiatives. The team decided to promote the taskforce and its purpose at the conference. This face-to-face interaction will allow for direct engagement with MA representatives and provide an opportunity to showcase the importance of the work that this TF is doing. In addition, to reach a wider audience, the team will use three established IFATCA communication channels:

- Controller Magazine: Articles will be published in future editions, detailing the task force's mission and ongoing projects.
- IFATCA Circular: This will include information about the newly established digital repository (MWTF DRIVE) and provide instructions on how MAs can access and utilize this resource.
- Regional WhatsApp groups: Sharing short powerful messages that MAs can use to distribute amongst their own ATCOs regarding various matters relating to wellbeing and mental health.

Repository Structure and membership engagement
The TF has established a platform whereby all material collected and developed by the TF can be made available to MAs that wish to promote mental health and wellbeing through an awareness program or that wishes to start a CISM or Multiple Stressor Peer Support Program. The folder structure will be variable as needs may change, but generally it will have the following structure:

CISM	CISM training-refresher courses	
	CISM training - initial courses	
Peer Support		
Mental Health	MH Promotion	content created by MWTF
		content from social media
		sensitive materials
	Mental wellbeing research and online materials	Case studies
		Academic studies
		Links from the web
Industry documents	Partner organizations	
	Best practices	
	Regulations	
*New documents add here		

Healthcare avoidance study

IFATCA has partnered with Washington University to host a global study on ATCO behaviour as it pertains to healthcare. The aim with the study is to collect anonymous data that can inform the current reality on how healthcare matters are approached by ATCOs in terms of avoiding self-reporting or seeking help. We believe this study will provide credible peer reviewed research-based data that can be used to engage regulators as well as ICAO on matters of healthcare and how it can be approached in the interest of industry safety. The survey will be launched at the 2025 conference and conclude on 31 May 2025.

Next steps

Based on the progress and insights gained through the various streams, we propose the following steps to further enhance our TF efforts to the benefit of ATCO's across the globe:

Expanding the Digital Resource Library

- Continuously update and diversify the content in the MWTF DRIVE
- Develop a system for regular content reviews and updates to ensure relevance and accuracy

Enhance Member Association Engagement
- Implement a quarterly newsletter highlighting new resources and upcoming mental health initiatives
- Develop a toolkit for MAs to conduct local mental health awareness campaigns, promote destigmatization of mental health and promote healthy wellbeing habits.

Strengthen Content Creation Strategy
- Develop a mix of content types (e.g., infographics, short videos, articles) to cater to diverse learning preferences

Improve Data Security and Access Management
- Develop clear guidelines for access levels and permissions

Foster Collaboration with Mental Health Professionals
- Establish partnerships with mental health organizations or professionals for expert input and validation of resources (medium term regional reach of mental health professionals with an understanding of the aviation constraints and limitations).
- Organize webinars or Q&A sessions with mental health professionals for IFATCA members

Implement Feedback Mechanisms
- Create a system for MAs to provide feedback (via surveys, questionnaires etc..) on the usefulness and relevance of resources.

Enhance Social Media Presence
- Develop a comprehensive social media strategy aligned with the mental health awareness calendar.

Conclusion

The wellbeing TF will continue to strive for excellence in supporting MAs in their endeavours to establish support programs. Where it may not make financial sense to establish a local program in isolation, the TF will provide resources to develop regional support capabilities in the interest of safety. Please reach out to us should your needs not be covered in the material discussed in this working paper. The ATCO community is thanked for the amazing role they play in serving the aviation industry despite very challenging circumstances at times. You make us proud!

-=END=-