

Anthony Chu

PO Box 4102 | Alexandria, VA | 22303

mr.anthonychu@yahoo.com

202-649-0322

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National Coalition of Federal Aviation Employees with Disabilities
c/o FAA Mike Monroney Aeronautical Center
6500 South MacArthur Blvd.
HQ Building, Suite BS-13A
Oklahoma City, OK 73169

Dear Awards Committee:

It is my honor to nominate **Joseph “Rocky” Roppo**, former acting manager of the Air Traffic Services team for the FAA Air Traffic Organization’s Management Services Technical Requirements and Forecasting Group, for the prestigious NCFEED Keller-Sullivan Award for 2020. Rocky is currently in a new role with the ATO’s Air Traffic Services organization.

Last year, Mr. Roppo oversaw the office that provides a balanced FAA air traffic controller workforce by ensuring that current employee movements align with prioritized staffing needs and placing new hires using transparent and objective processes. Between March 2019 and through the beginning of fiscal year 2020, in addition to coordinating assignments and reassignments, he also served as the Air Traffic Organization’s national action officer for the Aviation Development Program. The FAA created ADP to provide an opportunity for persons with targeted disabilities to gain aviation knowledge and experience, for a possible appointment to the Air Traffic Control Specialist occupation.

The air traffic controller workforce is a mission-critical occupation: more than 14,500 controllers stationed at 300 locations safely guide 44,000 flights across the most complex airspace system in the world. Every day. It is a lucrative career field because there are minimal entry-level requirements (no college or prior aviation experience needed to qualify), trainees are paid for all job-required training, and many employees earn a six-figure salary within five years. A new hire who achieves full performance level can look forward to a rewarding high-paying career with job security, growth potential, and comprehensive benefits – it is a position that can lift someone to a higher socioeconomic status. Annually, more than 10,000 people vie for a chance to be picked for less than 1,000 positions, and many controllers exude pride in belonging to this exciting profession. Some people have equated getting selected for a slot at the FAA’s Air Traffic Academy to winning the lottery.

But the controller workforce has not reflected the demographics of America and the career remains out of reach for many people. One demographic that continues to be underrepresented is the persons with disabilities/persons with targeted disabilities group. While 8.26% of the FAA workforce identified as a person with disabilities (0.68% with

targeted disabilities), the air traffic controller occupational category recorded only a 2.74% (0.11% targeted disabilities) “participation rate,” according to the FAA’s Office of Civil Rights’ annual report for fiscal 2017. That year, the FAA hired only 23 persons with disabilities (0 people with targeted disabilities) out of the 1,880 new-hire controllers.

Resolved to do better, the FAA created ADP as a demonstration program, with the vision of it becoming a pipeline for persons with disabilities to join the controller workforce. Instead of announcing positions for the general public, a 2019 goal was for the FAA to open a job announcement under the direct-hire Schedule A authority to fill 20 positions. While the hiring requirements (including aptitude, medical, and security screening) were essentially the same as a general public announcement, ADP candidates would be recruited from the local community and be assigned to a facility where their support system was close by. Also, ADP hires would spend a year at the facility learning about aviation and supporting various assignments while being mentored by an experienced controller, forming a special bond that could help ease the employee’s transition into the FAA.

Many people at the FAA supported this effort through a cross-functional tiger team that met biweekly. However, Mr. Roppo became the primary FAA representative at public meetings that encouraged people to apply for the job. Internally, he was the Air Traffic Organization’s liaison between the Office of Civil Rights, Office of Human Resource Management, Office of Aerospace Medicine, and Office of Technical Training, and other subject matter experts. He reached out to state and local stakeholders to advertise the positions. He also worked with leadership at 10 Air Route Traffic Control Centers where the ADP candidates would be employed to prepare the facility and the employees for the program. One of the biggest risks for the vacancy announcement was not having enough qualified applicants, and we were at risk of not meeting the goal: before Mr. Roppo was assigned the project, we would hold public information sessions and have no attendance from our target population.

Mr. Roppo immediately switched the public information session strategy. Instead of booking a hotel conference room and advertising three sessions, he worked with local stakeholders such as Veterans groups, disability services organizations, and college career centers to determine the best way to engage their communities. The FAA conducted one-on-one meetings with potential candidates, walked through the process with career counselors, and offered facility tours to interested members of the public. Within three months, with Mr. Roppo’s influence, the FAA conducted 16 formal public meetings and three virtual information sessions that reached more than 200 individuals interested in the program.

I accompanied Mr. Roppo on the majority of the facility visits and public meetings. I watched him patiently explain the program to various stakeholders, advocate on behalf of potential applicants and “doing the right thing,” clear up red-tape and other

misunderstandings that are common with pilot programs, and make decisions on issues that improved how we publicized the program. Through every interaction, he endeavored to dispel misinformation and to include stakeholders who were left out.

Furthermore, with every encounter, Mr. Roppo made sure we explained the Schedule A hiring program and encouraged potential applicants, career counselors, disability services staff members, and Veterans group representatives to consider applying for other positions through the unique program. More than 80% of the people we spoke with did not know about the Schedule A hiring program and were very excited to learn about the government-wide opportunity. The site visits also provided an opportunity to identify partners for future hiring initiatives: we collected contact information from more than 500 offices to expand our database. Already, some of these contacts have invited us to future career fairs.

As a result of the outreach that Rocky led in the Spring and Summer of 2019, 43 of the 62 potential applicants were qualified to take the Air Traffic Sills Assessment exam and moved on with subsequent stages in the hiring process. By February 2020, the ATO reported that the effort yielded 17 candidates that led to three hires. By September 2020, three individuals are successfully completing their training while three additional candidates are in the pipeline to be hired. As this program begins its second round of hiring, it continues to attract interest and remains a viable hiring initiative for the FAA.

ADP is a visible example of an agency program that supports NCFEAD's mission: ADP ensures that qualified individuals are afforded an equal opportunity to participate in the hiring process of a highly competitive, very lucrative career field. That we do not have more persons with disabilities in the air traffic profession may be because potential applicants were misinformed about whether someone with a disability can qualify to be a controller (some people with disabilities do qualify!) and they choose not to apply thinking they would not qualify. By supporting ADP, Mr. Roppo also took on ten weeks of travel while still performing his primary duties. He interacted with stakeholders after hours and on weekends and was very responsive to public inquiries.

By going above and beyond his expected responsibilities, Mr. Roppo was a crucial resource that allowed the FAA to achieve a unique hiring program where people with disabilities to compete for a position that is severely underrepresented. While The agency continues to recruit for the program and candidates are at various stages of the hiring process, without Mr. Roppo's involvement and leadership, we would likely not have the response rate we achieved for the inaugural year, and the air traffic profession likely would not have the chance to increase its ranks with people with disabilities.

The FAA is very fortunate to have Mr. Roppo as a champion of disability hiring. His commitment to increasing representation for people with disabilities in the air traffic career

field and his support of the overall diversity mission is laudable, and it represents the spirit of this NCFEED award. I have attached some supporting documentation of Mr. Roppo's involvement in ADP to support this nomination. Please contact me at 510.913.6499 or mr.anthonychu@yahoo.com if you would like more information.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Anthony Chu". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Anthony Chu

Member, National Coalition of Federal Aviation Employees with Disabilities

and

Former President, FAA Chapter, Federal Asian Pacific American Council

