

April 29, 2003

The Honorable David Walker  
Comptroller General  
U.S. General Accounting Office  
441 G Street, NW  
Washington, DC 20548

Dear Comptroller General Walker:

As you know, the Committee on Governmental Affairs is extensively involved in issues relating to homeland security oversight. Last Congress, the Committee held hearings on aviation security, following the terrorist attacks of September 11. The Aviation and Transportation Security Act (the Act), Pub. L. 107-71 (enacted November 19, 2001), contained several provisions that were based on concerns arising from these hearings. While the Transportation Security Administration (TSA), which was created by the same legislation, appears to have made significant progress in addressing issues such as passenger screening and screening of checked baggage, it is unclear whether comparable progress has been made in other areas. I am therefore requesting that GAO investigate TSA's progress in the following areas: 1) preventing unauthorized access to restricted areas of airports; 2) developing better aviation security technology; and 3) overseeing employees of airport contractors and vendors to deter criminal acts against the airport or aircraft.

Investigations by both GAO and the Department of Transportation Inspector General's Office, prior to the September 11 attacks, revealed the ease with which unauthorized access to restricted areas within airports could occur. Section 136 of Pub. L. 107-71 required TSA to assess and recommend to airport operators "commercially available measures or procedures to prevent access to secure airport areas by unauthorized persons" and to provide a 12 month deployment strategy for currently available technology at the country's largest airports. Within 18 months after enactment of the Act, TSA must review the reduction in unauthorized access at the largest airports. In addition, section 106 requires that all individuals, vehicles and other equipment, goods and property be screened or inspected before being allowed into secure areas of the airport and onboard aircraft. I am requesting that GAO undertake a review of TSA's actions pursuant to sections 106 and 136 to determine whether TSA has conducted assessments of current practices, the effectiveness of TSA's recommendations and the implementation of those recommendations by airports. In particular, I would like GAO to determine

whether unauthorized access to restricted areas of airports has been significantly reduced and what additional measures, if any, are necessary to correct this problem.

Section 137 of the Act authorized funds for TSA to accelerate research, development, testing and evaluation of technologies to improve screening of baggage, cargo and individuals; hardening of aircraft materials; and for other security-related purposes. GAO should review TSA's research program to determine whether it has successfully accelerated the development of improved technologies through this program and, if not, why that has not occurred. GAO should review, as a part of this effort, whether TSA's research in this area is fully coordinated with the Department's Science and Technology Directorate, the quality of its outreach effort to locate new technology innovations, whether innovative private sector firms and research organizations are well-informed about the submission and acquisition paths TSA is using for consideration of research on and deployment of new technologies, whether TSA's research efforts are adequately funded and staffed to effectively consider new technology opportunities, and whether TSA has adequately coordinated its research efforts with other available federal research and development expertise (including at DARPA, the Technical Support Working Group and other defense research agencies).

Finally, I remain concerned about the number of individuals who are employees of airport tenants and vendors who have access to restricted areas of an airport. These individuals are potentially in a position to plant weapons and other dangerous materials on and around aircraft. Section 106 of the Act requires vendors with direct access to the airfield and aircraft to develop security programs designed to prevent or deter a terrorist or criminal act against the airport or onboard aircraft. In addition, section 138 of the Act requires the performance of background checks and criminal history checks for contractor employees who have regular "escorted access" to secure areas of an airport, such as those who deliver aircraft parts. I am requesting that GAO determine what TSA has done to implement these requirements and how effectively they are being carried out. If there are deficiencies, please describe them and explain what more needs to be done in this area.

Thank you for your attention to this request. If you have any questions, please contact Susan Propper on the Committee staff at (202) 224-6599.

Sincerely,

Joseph I. Lieberman  
Ranking Member