November 5, 2003

AVIATION SECURITY

Efforts to Measure Effectiveness and Address Challenges

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Highlights

Highlights of GAO-04-232T, a testimony to the Committee on Commerce, Science and Technology, U.S. Senate

Why GAO Did This Study

It has been 2 years since the attacks of September 11, 2001, exposed vulnerabilities in the nation's aviation system. Since then, billions of dollars have been spent on a wide range of initiatives designed to enhance the security of commercial aviation. However, vulnerabilities in aviation security continue to exist. As a result, questions have been raised regarding the effectiveness of established initiatives in protecting commercial aircraft from threat objects, and whether additional measures are needed to further enhance security. Accordingly, GAO was asked to describe the Transportation Security Administration's (TSA) efforts to (1) measure the effectiveness of its aviation security initiatives, particularly its passenger screening program; (2) implement a risk management approach to prioritize efforts and focus resources; and (3) address key challenges to further enhance aviation security.

What GAO Recommends

In prior reports and testimonies, GAO has made numerous recommendations to strengthen aviation security and to improve the management of federal aviation security organizations. We also have ongoing reviews assessing many of the issues addressed in this testimony and will issue separate reports on these areas at a later date.

www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?-GAO-04-232T.

To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on the link above. For more information, contact Cathleen A. Berrick at (202) 512-8777 or bbeberrickc@gao.gov..

What GAO Found

TSA has implemented numerous initiatives designed to enhance aviation security, but has collected limited information on the effectiveness of these initiatives in protecting commercial aircraft. Our recent work on passenger screening found that little testing or other data exist that measures the performance of screeners in detecting threat objects. However, TSA is taking steps to collect data on the effectiveness of its security initiatives, including developing a 5-year performance plan detailing numerous performance measures, as well as implementing several efforts to collect performance data on the effectiveness of passenger screening—such as fielding the Threat Image Projection System and increasing screener testing.

Passenger Screening Checkpoint at U.S. Airport

Source: FAA.

TSA has developed a risk management approach to prioritize efforts, assess threats, and focus resources related to its aviation security initiatives as we previously recommended, but has not yet fully implemented this approach. A risk management approach is a systematic process to analyze threats, vulnerabilities, and the criticality (or relative importance) of assets to better support key decisions. TSA is developing and implementing both a criticality and a vulnerability assessment tool to provide a basis for risk-based decision-making. TSA is currently using some components of these tools and plans to fully implement its risk management approach by the summer 2004.

TSA faces a number of programmatic and management challenges as it continues to enhance aviation security. These include the implementation of the new computer-assisted passenger prescreening system, as well as strengthening baggage screening, airport perimeter and access controls, air cargo, and general aviation security. TSA also must manage the costs associated with aviation security and address human capital challenges, such as sizing its workforce as efficiency is improved with security-enhancing technologies—including the integration of explosive detection systems into in-line baggage-handling systems. Further challenges in sizing its workforce may be encountered if airports are granted permission to opt out of using federal screeners.