AVIATION SAFETY

FAA's Safety Oversight System Is Effective but Could Benefit from Better Evaluation of Its Programs' Performance

Why GAO Did This Study

The U.S. commercial aviation industry has an extraordinary safety record. However, when passenger airlines have accidents or serious incidents, regardless of their rarity, the consequences can be tragic. The Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) works to maintain a high level of safety through an effective safety oversight system. Keys to this system are to: (1) establish programs that focus resources on areas of highest safety risk and on mitigating risks; (2) provide training and communication to ensure that inspectors can consistently carry out the agency's oversight programs; and (3) have processes and data to continuously monitor, evaluate, and improve the numerous oversight programs that make up the safety oversight system. This statement focuses on these three key areas and is based on recent GAO reports on FAA's inspection oversight programs, industry partnership programs, enforcement program, and training program.

What GAO Recommends

In order to help FAA fully realize the benefits of its safety oversight system, GAO has made a number of recommendations to address weaknesses identified in previous reviews, such as improving program evaluation and data. These recommendations have not been fully implemented, although in some cases FAA has taken steps towards addressing them.

www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-06-266T.

To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on the link above. For more information, contact Dr. Gerald Dillingham at (202) 512-2834 or dillinghamg@gao.gov.

What GAO Found

FAA's safety oversight system includes programs that focus on risk identification and mitigation through a risk-based system safety approach, leveraging of resources through designee and partnership relationships, and enforcement of safety regulations, but the benefits of these programs are not being fully realized. For example, FAA's system safety approach includes the addition of a program that emphasizes risk identification to its traditional inspection program for overseeing some airlines, which is not based on risk. However, it is likely that the benefits of this approach could be enhanced if the inspection workload was not as heavily oriented to the traditional inspection program's non-risk based activities. FAA leverages its resources through its designee programs, in which designated individuals and organizations perform about 90 percent of certification-related activities, and through its industry partnership programs, which are designed to assist the agency in receiving safety information. An outgrowth of FAA's inspection process is its enforcement program, which is intended to ensure industry compliance with safety regulations. However, GAO has expressed concerns that this program may not be as effective as it could be in deterring violations.

FAA has made training an integral part of its safety oversight system, but several actions could improve the results of its training efforts, including ensuring that inspectors are well-trained in FAA's system safety approach and have sufficient knowledge of increasingly complex aircraft and systems to effectively identify safety risks. FAA has established mandatory training requirements for its workforce and designees. We have reported that FAA has generally followed effective management practices for planning, developing, delivering, and assessing the impact of its technical training for safety inspectors.

GAO has found inadequate evaluative processes and limitations with data for FAA's inspection programs, designee programs, industry partnership programs, and enforcement program. For example, FAA lacked requirements or criteria for evaluating its designee programs. In another example, FAA's nationwide enforcement database is not as useful as it could be because of missing or incomplete historical information about enforcement cases.

FAA's Safety Oversight System Includes Inspections, Training, and Other Activities

Source: FAA.

United States Government Accountability Office