United States General Accounting Office

GAO

Testimony

Before the Subcommittee on Aviation, Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure, House of Representatives

For Release on Delivery
Expected at 10:00 a.m. EDT
Thursday, April 22, 2004

AVIATION SECURITY

Private Screening Contractors Have Little Flexibility to Implement Innovative Approaches

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April 2004

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GAO Highlights

Highlights of GAO-04-505T, a testimony before the Subcommittee on Aviation, Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure, House of Representatives

Why GAO Did This Study

The terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, resulted in fundamental changes in the way the United States screens airport passengers and their property. One of the most significant changes was the shift from using private screeners to using federal screeners at all but five commercial airports in the United States. These five airports are part of a pilot program, where private screeners perform screening functions. The mission of the Private Screening Pilot Program, as defined by the Transportation Security Administration (TSA), is to test the effectiveness of increased operational flexibility at the airport level that contractors may provide. GAO was asked to describe (1) the challenges and limitations of the private screening pilot program, (2) the operational flexibilities TSA has provided to the private screening companies, and (3) the performance of private and federal screeners in detecting threat objects. This testimony is based on our prior and ongoing work on TSA airport passenger and baggage screeners.

What GAO Recommends

In prior reports, GAO has made recommendations designed to strengthen airport passenger and baggage screening. GAO also has several ongoing reviews related to the issues addressed in this testimony, and will issue separate reports related to these areas at later dates, with additional recommendations as appropriate.

www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-04-505T.

To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on the link above. For more information, contact Norman J. Rabkin at (202) 512-8777 or rabkinn@gao.gov.

What GAO Found

A key limitation of the private screening pilot program is that it was not established in a way to enable an effective evaluation of the differences in the performance of federal and private screening and the reasons for those differences. TSA provided the screening contractors with little opportunity to demonstrate innovations, achieve efficiencies, and implement initiatives that go beyond the minimum requirements of the Aviation and Transportation Security Act. TSA officials said they had not granted contract officials more flexibility because they wanted to ensure that procedures were standardized, well coordinated, and consistently implemented throughout all airports to achieve consistent security. However, TSA recently requested input from the private screening contractors about the additional flexibilities they would like to implement.

Although TSA has provided private screening contractors with only limited operational flexibility, it has allowed them to implement some airport-specific practices. These practices include screening candidates before they are hired through the assessment centers, hiring baggage handlers in order to utilize baggage screeners more efficiently, and, during the initial hiring, selecting screener supervisors from within their screener workforce rather than relying on the decisions of TSA's hiring contractors. These practices have enabled the private screening contractors to achieve efficiencies that are not currently available at airports with federal screeners.

Little performance data are currently available to compare the performance of private screeners and federal screeners in detecting threat objects. The primary source of available performance data is the results of the covert tests performed by TSA's Office of Internal Affairs and Program Review, in which TSA undercover agents attempt to pass threat objects through screening checkpoints. Although the test results cannot be generalized either to the airports where the tests have been conducted or to airports nationwide, they provide an indicator of screener performance in detecting threat objects and indicate that, in general, private and federal screeners performed similarly. Specifically, the testing identified weaknesses in the ability of both private and federal screeners to detect threat objects. TSA recognized the need to improve screener performance and has taken steps in this direction, including enhancing its training programs.

Airports Participating in the Pilot Program and Contractors Responsible for Conducting Screening Operations

Airport	Contract screening company
San Francisco International	Covenant Aviation Security
Kansas City International	First Line Transportation Security
Greater Rochester International	McNeil Security
Jackson Hole	Jackson Hole Airport Board
Tupelo	Covenant Aviation Security

Source: TSA.

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee:

Thank you for inviting me to participate in today's hearing to discuss the Transportation Security Administration's (TSA) private screening program. The terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, resulted in fundamental changes in the way the United States screens airport passengers and their property. One of the most significant changes was the shift from the use of private screeners to perform screening functions to the use of federal screeners at all but five commercial airports in the United States. The Aviation and Transportation Security Act (ATSA), enacted on November 19, 2001, mandated the federalization of airport security screening and required that five airports be part of a pilot program where screening functions are performed by private screeners. The mission of the Private Screening Pilot Program, as defined by TSA, is to test the effectiveness of increased operational flexibility at the airport level that contractors may provide. ATSA also includes a provision that allows an airport to apply to opt out of using federal screeners beginning on November 19, 2004.

My testimony today addresses TSA's implementation and evaluation of the contract screening pilot program. In particular, I will address (1) the challenges and limitations of the private screening pilot program, (2) the operational flexibilities TSA has provided to the private screening contractors, and (3) the performance of private and federal screeners in detecting threat objects. My testimony is based on our prior work and preliminary observations from our ongoing reviews of TSA's passenger screening program, all of which have been done in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards.

In summary:

- A key limitation of the private screening pilot program is that it was not established in a way to enable an effective evaluation of the differences in the performance of federal and private screening and the reasons for those differences. TSA has provided the private screening contractors with little opportunity to demonstrate innovations, achieve efficiencies, and implement initiatives that go beyond the minimum requirements of ATSA. Because TSA requires the pilot screening contractors and Federal Security Directors (FSD) at airports with federal screeners to operate under the

same procedures, they faced many of the same challenges.[1] For example, the private screening contractors, like FSDs at airports with federal screeners, must rely on TSA to authorize the hiring of screeners and establish assessment centers, where screener applicants are assessed.[2] The inability to conduct hiring on an as needed basis has limited their ability to respond quickly to staffing shortages. TSA officials stated that they had not granted contract officials more flexibility because they wanted to ensure that procedures were standardized, well coordinated, and consistently implemented throughout all airports to achieve consistent security. However, TSA recently requested input from the private screening contractors about the additional flexibilities they would like to implement.

- Although TSA has provided private screening contractors with only limited operational flexibility, it has allowed them to implement some airport-specific practices. Flexible practices implemented by private screening contractors include screening candidates before they are hired through the assessment centers, hiring baggage handlers in order to utilize baggage screeners more efficiently,[3] and, during the initial hiring, selecting screener supervisors from within rather than relying on the decisions of TSA's hiring contractors. These practices have enabled the private screening contractors to achieve efficiencies that are not currently available to FSDs at airports with federal screeners.

- Little performance data are currently available to compare the performance of private screeners and federal screeners in detecting threat objects. The primary source of available performance data is the results of covert tests performed by TSA's Office of Internal Affairs and Program Review (OIAPR), in which TSA undercover agents attempt to pass threat objects through screening checkpoints and in checked baggage.[4] Although

[1]FSDs are responsible for providing day-to-day operational direction for federal security at airports. Additionally, the FSD is the ranking TSA authority responsible for the leadership and coordination of TSA security activities at the airports.

[2]An assessment center is a temporary testing site that TSA's hiring contractor assembles to conduct assessments of screener applicants. The centers are generally constructed at locations such as hotels and TSA training facilities that are in close proximity to the airport(s) where the FSDs have requested additional staff.

[3]Baggage handlers move baggage from carts to belts and back. They do not perform any screening functions, nor are they hired through TSA's assessment centers.

[4]OIAPR conducts covert tests designed to (1) assess screeners' ability to detect threat objects and adherence to TSA-approved procedures and (2) identify systemic problems in the areas of training, policy, and technology.

the test results cannot be generalized either to the airports in which the tests have been conducted or to airports nationwide,[5] they provide an indicator of screener performance in detecting threat objects and indicate that, in general, private and federal screeners performed similarly. Specifically, the testing identified weaknesses in the ability of both private and federal screeners to detect threat objects.[6] TSA recognized the need to improve the performance of both private and federal screeners and has taken steps in this direction, including enhancing its training programs.

Background

ATSA created TSA to ensure security for all modes of transportation, including aviation. ATSA set forth specific enhancements to aviation security for TSA to implement and established deadlines for completing many of them. These enhancements included federalizing passenger screeners at more than 440 commercial airports in the United States by November 19, 2002; enhancing screener hiring and training standards; and establishing and managing a 2-year pilot program at 5 airports—one in each airport security category[7]—where screening of passengers and property would be conducted by a private screening company and overseen by TSA. Additionally, ATSA included a provision that allows airport operators to apply to TSA to use private rather than federal screeners beginning in November 2004. TSA has acknowledged that one of its key challenges in 2004 will be designing appropriate criteria for the potential expansion of contract screening.

As required by ATSA, TSA implemented a pilot program using contract screeners in lieu of federal screeners at 5 commercial airports—one in each airport security category. ATSA sets forth numerous requirements regarding the pilot program. Specifically, it requires that

- the private screening company be owned and controlled by a citizen of the United States;

[5]The results of the tests cannot be generalized either to the airports in which the tests have been conducted or to airports nationwide because the sample tests were not identified using the principles of probability sampling. For cost and operational reasons, however, using probability sampling techniques to identify sample tests may not be feasible.

[6]We cannot disclose the actual results of the covert tests because they are classified.

[7]There are five categories of airports—X, I, II, III, and IV. Category X airports have the largest number of enplanements and category IV airports have the smallest number.

- the private screening company, at a minimum, meet employment standards, compensation and benefits rates, and performance requirements that apply to federal screeners;
- all private screener candidates meet the same minimum qualifications as federal screeners, including U.S. citizenship,[8] high school diploma or equivalent, English proficiency, and pass a criminal background check; and
- all private screener candidates undergo the same battery of employment screening tests that federal screener candidates undergo.

In June 2002, TSA selected the 5 airports that would comprise the contract screening pilot program. In October 2002, TSA awarded contracts to four private screening contractors to provide passenger and baggage screening services. TSA's role at the airports with private screeners is to provide on-site federal supervision of all passenger and property screening.[9] Table 1 provides a list of the airports participating in the pilot program and the private contractors responsible for conducting screening operations.

Table 1: Airports Participating in the Pilot Program and Contractors Responsible for Conducting Screening Operations

Airport security category	Airport	Contract screening company
X	San Francisco International	Covenant Aviation Security
I	Kansas City International	First Line Transportation Security
II	Greater Rochester International	McNeil Security
III	Jackson Hole Airport	Jackson Hole Airport Board
IV	Tupelo Airport	Covenant Aviation Security

Source: TSA.

Prior to the passage of ATSA, air carriers were responsible for screening passengers and most used private security firms to perform this function. Long-standing concerns existed regarding screener performance in detecting threat objects during covert tests at passenger screening

[8]Federal screeners must be either United States citizens or nationals of the United States (persons who, though not citizens of the United States, owe permanent allegiance to the United States).

[9]A federal security director and his or her management team, including screening managers, oversee screening operations at each of the airports with private screening contractors.

checkpoints. In 1978, screeners failed to detect 13 percent of the potentially dangerous objects Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) undercover agents carried through checkpoints during tests—a level that was considered "significant and alarming." In 1987, screeners did not detect 20 percent of the objects during the same types of tests. In addition, we reported that FAA tests conducted between 1991 and 1999 showed that screeners' ability to detect objects was not improving, and in some cases, was worsening. In tests conducted in the late 1990s, as the testing objects became more realistic and the tests more closely approximated how a terrorist might attempt to penetrate a checkpoint, screeners' ability to detect dangerous objects declined even further. Inadequate training and poor supervision, along with low wages, rapid turnover, and inadequate attention to human factors,[10] were historically identified as key contributors to poor screener performance.

The results I am presenting today are based on preliminary observations of our ongoing review of TSA's passenger screening program, which includes a review of TSA's efforts to implement and evaluate the contract screening pilot program. As part of our ongoing review, which we are conducting for this subcommittee, we interviewed TSA officials and visited all 5 pilot program airports and 23 airports with federal screeners. During these visits, we observed screening operations and interviewed FSDs, their staffs, and, at some airports, airport authority and airline officials. At the 5 pilot program airports, we also interviewed representatives of the private screening contractors. Additionally, we interviewed representatives of several aviation associations. We plan to conduct additional analysis during the remainder of our review, including assessing the results of our recent survey of all 155 FSDs regarding their screening operations. We will also review the results of the final report submitted to TSA by BearingPoint, Inc., which compared the performance of private screeners to federal screeners.[11]

[10]Human factors refers to the demands a job places on the capabilities of, and the constraints it imposes on the individuals performing the function. Some of these factors include repetitive tasks screeners perform, the close and constant monitoring required to detect threat objects, and the stress involved in dealing with the public who may dislike being screened or demand faster action to avoid missing their flights.

[11]ATSA gave TSA the responsibility to review the requests for those airports wishing to opt out of using TSA screeners in November 2004. TSA contracted with BearingPoint Inc., to develop an evaluation plan for assessing screening at the pilot program airports, and conduct an evaluation of the performance of private screening contractors, as well as compare screener performance at airports with TSA screeners.

Private Screening Contractors Have Had Little Opportunity to Demonstrate Innovations and Achieve Efficiencies

A key limitation of the private screening pilot program is that it was not established in a way to enable an effective evaluation of the differences in the performance of federal and private screening and the reasons for those differences. TSA has provided the private screening contractors with little opportunity to demonstrate innovations and achieve efficiencies. Because TSA requires the pilot screening contractors and FSDs at airports with federal screeners to operate under the same procedures, they faced many of the same challenges. For example, the private screening contractors, like FSDs at airports with federal screeners, must rely on TSA to authorize the hiring of screeners and establish assessment centers, where screener applicants are assessed. The inability to conduct hiring on an as needed basis has limited their ability to respond quickly to staffing shortages. TSA officials stated that they had not granted contract officials more flexibility because they wanted to ensure that procedures were standardized, well coordinated, and consistently implemented throughout all airports to achieve consistent security. However, TSA recently requested input from the private screening contractors about the additional flexibilities they would like to implement.

Private Screening Contractors Lack Authority to Determine Staffing Levels and Conduct Hiring

TSA determined the screener staffing needs of the private screening contractors using the same computer-based staffing model that was used for airports with federal screeners.[12] This staffing model was based on the congressionally mandated nationwide ceiling of 45,000 full-time equivalent[13] federal screeners. Both the contractors and FSDs at airports with federal screeners have raised concerns about the adequacy of the staffing model in accounting for the unique needs of each airport, particularly given that the model is based on a full-time equivalent ceiling. Two representatives of the private screening contractors that were at or near their TSA authorized staffing levels told us in February 2004 that they were concerned about having adequate staffing levels to meet demand during the peak 2004 travel season. TSA had required one of these contractors to lay off screeners in 2003 as part of its nationwide screener downsizing effort, even though, according to TSA, private screeners do not count toward TSA's ceiling of 45,000 full-time equivalent screeners. TSA

[12]The staffing model took into account factors such as the number of screening checkpoints and lanes at an airport; originating passengers; projected air carrier service increases and decreases during calendar year 2003; and hours needed to accommodate screener training, leave, and breaks.

[13]One full-time equivalent is equal to 1 work year or 2,080 non overtime hours.

acknowledged that its initial staffing efforts created imbalances in the screener workforce and hired a consultant in September 2003 to conduct a study of screener staffing levels, including levels for the 5 pilot program airports.[14] The study, which TSA initially expected to be completed in April 2004, is now scheduled for completion in May 2004. We will continue to review TSA's efforts to determine appropriate staffing levels during the remainder of our review.

The private screening contractors' concerns regarding their staffing levels are compounded by TSA's requirement that the contractors coordinate their hiring through TSA headquarters. These contractors, like FSDs at airports with federal screeners, must rely on TSA to authorize the hiring of screeners and establish assessment centers—a process that can take several months. The inability to conduct hiring on an as needed basis has limited their ability to respond quickly to staffing shortages. In one instance, an FSD for an airport with private screeners stated that in response to continued attrition at his airport, he notified TSA in advance that additional screeners would be needed before the peak summer travel season. However, an assessment center was not opened until mid-June 2003, and the FSD had to request assistance from TSA's Mobile Screening Force,[15] a team of TSA screeners deployed around the country where additional screening staff are needed. These screeners were in place for 2 months while TSA scheduled and conducted screener applicant assessments and trained candidates who were selected for employment by the private screening company. The private screening contractor and the FSD at this airport told us that the inability to hire screeners during the first several months of the attrition problem contributed to screener performance issues, such as absenteeism or tardiness, and screener complacency because screeners were aware that they were unlikely to be terminated due to staffing shortages.

[14]Specifically, the consultant is to, among other tasks, develop a model for collecting and analyzing data to realistically portray specific airport conditions rather than using a generalized large/small airport protocol; develop a comprehensive modeling approach with appropriate details to account for the considerable variability that occurs among airports; and implement a staffing analysis model to be used as a management tool to determine daily and weekly staffing levels and deploy the model to commercial airports nationwide.

[15]TSA's Mobile Screening Force—replaced by the National Screening Force—was created in early 2002 primarily to support the initial deployment of federal screeners to commercial airports. The National Screening Force provides screening support to all commercial airports in times of emergency, seasonal demands, or under other special circumstances that require a greater number of screeners than currently available to FSDs.

Pilot program contractors have requested the opportunity to independently establish and operate assessment centers on an as needed basis. Accordingly, in December 2003 and February 2004, TSA submitted to the screening contractors requests for proposals for additional flexibilities. TSA's December 12, 2003, request for proposal, which solicited input from the private screening contractors on potential program innovations regarding day-to-day operations, was followed by a more specific request for proposals, dated February 24, 2004, to provide human resource services, such as screener assessments, qualification, examination, and selection of security screener candidates.[16] TSA received proposals from 3 of the private screening contractors, and found that they were insufficient in meeting the requirements set forth in the request for proposal.[17] However, TSA officials said they are providing the contractors a second chance to clarify their proposals.

Private Screening Contractors Have Limited Authority to Implement Training

According to TSA, there are three key elements of passenger screening training: (1) basic training, (2) recurrent (refresher) training, and (3) remedial training. As required by ATSA, TSA established a basic screener training program comprised of a minimum of 40 hours of classroom instruction and 60 hours of on-the-job training for all passenger and baggage screeners. TSA also requires private and federal screeners to participate in 3 hours of recurrent training per week, averaged over a quarter. Consistent with ATSA, TSA further requires remedial training for any private or federal screener who fails an operational test.[18]

Representatives of the private screening contractors stated that a challenge they face in implementing their screening functions is the limitations TSA places on them in developing and implementing locally based training programs. Private screening contractors at the pilot program airports are required to participate in the basic screener training

[16]In addition to stating the required standards that each private contractor must meet during the hiring process, the request details TSA's expectations for the proposals. For example, the request requires the contractor to propose the manner in which administration of the assessments will be accomplished, including the most effective and efficient way to deliver the assessments.

[17]TSA officials said they had not received any proposals in response to the December 2003 request for proposal.

[18]ATSA requires that screeners who fail an operational test be prohibited from performing the screening function related to the test they failed until they successfully complete remedial training on that screening function.

provided by TSA's training contractor and to maintain the same recurrent and remedial training curriculums used by TSA. To provide training beyond TSA's curriculums, the private screening contractors must have their training reviewed and approved by TSA. Contractors expressed concern that TSA had either rejected or was slow to approve their requests to provide additional training outside of TSA's approved curriculum. This was of particular concern during the first year of the pilot program when TSA had not yet deployed a recurrent or supervisory training program to airports to ensure that screeners were effectively trained and supervised. TSA officials told us, on the other hand, that the private screening contractors have yet to submit any requests for approval of locally developed recurrent training.

Private screening contractors also expressed concerns about the lack of specific feedback regarding screeners' performance on the annual recertification tests, which assess their proficiency in identifying threat objects and adhering to standard operating procedures. TSA stores the results of the recertification tests in a database that FSDs can access to determine whether screeners for their respective airports passed or failed. However, private screening contractors told us they cannot view how screeners performed on specific questions. These performance data would provide private screening contractors with information on the specific training needs of screeners, and enable them to appropriately tailor training to address screener performance deficiencies at their airports.

FSDs at Airports with Federal Screeners Faced Similar Challenges as Contractors

FSDs at airports with federal screeners faced many of the same challenges as the private screening contractors, particularly regarding imposed staffing levels, a cumbersome hiring process, and limited flexibility in implementing local training programs. In September 2003, we reported that FSDs had little input in determining their screener staffing levels.[19] Since then, FSDs have continued to express concerns about their limited role in establishing airport-specific staffing levels and the need for realistic staffing levels based on the unique needs of each airport. In February 2004, we reported that many of the FSDs we interviewed expressed concern with the lack of a continuous hiring process to backfill screeners lost through attrition, and their lack of authority to conduct hiring on an as

[19]U.S. General Accounting Office, *Airport Passenger Screening: Preliminary Observations on Progress Made and Challenges Remaining*, GAO-03-1173 (Washington, D.C.: Sept. 24, 2003).

needed basis.[20] The FSDs also complained of the time lag between their requests for additional staff and having trained and certified screeners onboard. Some FSDs reported that this time lag has hindered their ability to provide sufficient resources to staff screening checkpoints and oversee screening operations at their airports. Contractors at 3 of the pilot program airports reported difficulties in getting an assessment center established for hiring at their airport, particularly after the first cadre of screeners had been hired, trained, and deployed. Likewise, an FSD at an airport with federal screeners reported that inadequate staffing is his most critical issue. He stated that to address the staffing inadequacies and maintain a reasonably acceptable passenger wait time level, FSD staff and screening management personnel have assisted in staffing of exit lanes, checking boarding passes, and transporting bags, among other tasks. However, he noted that these practices are not sustainable in the long term.

We recently surveyed all 155 FSDs regarding their screening operations. As of April 13, 2004, we had a response rate of about 90 percent for our general survey and about 85 percent for our airport-specific survey.[21] We asked the FSDs the extent to which they needed additional authority to perform their staffing and screening operations. As shown in table 2, the overwhelming majority of the FSDs, and in two instances all five of the FSDs at the pilot program airports, reported that they needed additional authority to a great or very great extent.

[20]U.S. General Accounting Office, *Aviation Security: Challenges Exist in Stabilizing and Enhancing Passenger and Baggage Screening Operations*, GAO-04-440T (Washington, D.C.: Feb. 12, 2004).

[21]We sent two surveys to the Federal Security Directors on March 23, 2004. In the general survey, we asked FSDs to answer security-related questions that will pertain to all of the airports for which he/she is responsible. In the airport-specific survey, we asked FSDs a number of airport-specific questions about screening and other security concerns.

Table 2: Summary of Selected FSD Survey Responses as of April 13, 2004

"In your opinion, to what extent, if at all, do you need or would you like to have the following to better address specific staffing or security needs at the airport(s) that you oversee?"

	Very great extent		Great extent		Moderate extent		Some or little extent		No extent	
	Federal	Pilot	Federal	Pilot	Federal	Pilot	Federal	Pilot	Federal	Pilot
Greater authority in determining the number of screeners	78%	100%	15%	0	6%	0	1%	0	0	0
Greater authority in the selection of screeners	67%	100%	19%	0	10%	0	3%	0	1%	0
More flexibility to design and conduct local training	44%	80%	24%	20%	25%	0	4%	0	1%	0

Source: GAO analysis of survey of 155 FSDs, including the five FSDs at airports with private screeners.

Note: The percentages do not total 100 because we did not include the not applicable/no opinion response.

Flexibilities Have Been Provided to Private Screeners in a Few Areas

Although, overall, TSA has not provided private screening contractors with much operational flexibility, it has allowed them to implement some airport-specific practices. Practices implemented by the private screening contractors include screening candidates before they are hired though the assessment centers, hiring baggage handlers in order to utilize baggage screeners more efficiently, and promoting screener supervisors from within rather than hiring them directly from the assessment center. These practices have enabled the private screening contractors to achieve efficiencies that are not currently available to FSDs at airports with federal screeners.

Contractors Have Greater Role than FSDs in Screener Selection Process

Although the private screening contractors can only hire applicants who have been screened through the assessment center, the contractors have greater flexibility than FSDs at airports with federal screeners in weeding out candidates they deem unsuitable. For example, at one airport, following the applicants' successful completion of the first assessment phase at the assessment center, the private screening contractor interviews the candidates to assess whether the company thinks they are a good fit for the job. Individuals whom the contractor agrees to hire are sent through the second phase at the assessment center and, upon successful completion of that assessment phase, to training. FSDs at airports with federal screeners have expressed the need for a role in the hiring process. Several FSDs told us that it is important for them or their

staff to participate in the hiring process to both build a rapport with the screeners early in the process and to determine whether the screener candidates would be a good fit for their airport, thereby possibly reducing the high levels of attrition. TSA officials told us that they are planning to redesign and streamline TSA's hiring process, particularly the assessment center process, to allow for greater involvement by FSDs and their staff. Specifically, officials reported that they are beginning to (1) ensure that the recruiting contractor includes the FSD in recruiting planning, including obtaining input regarding where and how the contractor recruits; (2) allow FSDs to participate with TSA's hiring contractor in the structured interview of the candidates; and (3) ensure that FSDs swear in the candidates and provide organizational briefings on their first day of orientation.

TSA Allowed Contractor to Hire Baggage Handlers

TSA has also allowed a private screening contractor to hire baggage handlers to enhance checked baggage screening operations. The contractor uses baggage handlers instead of trained baggage screeners to move checked baggage to and from the explosive detection system or explosive trace detection equipment and onward through the baggage system. While the baggage handlers still count toward the full-time equivalent authorized staffing level established by TSA for that individual airport, both TSA and the contractor report that this flexibility has provided a means to reduce costs without diminishing security by allowing trained baggage screeners to devote a greater proportion of time to screening bags. The contractor officials also told us that while they were operating below their authorized staffing levels, they were still able to effectively operate screening checkpoints due in part to their use of baggage handlers.[22] TSA has not provided FSDs with the authority to hire baggage handlers, and thus, FSDs at airports with federal screeners where baggage handlers would be useful are more limited in their ability to efficiently maximize staffing resources.

[22]The same contractor also has a system in place to continuously monitor lines at checkpoints and check-in counters in order to deploy resources where they are most needed. This system, which uses security cameras at an airport operations center that was already in place at the airport, is used to determine if and where screeners should be redeployed. The monitoring system has also contributed to the contractor's ability to effectively operate below its authorized staffing level. TSA officials told us that any FSD could work with an airport that has such an operations center in place to implement this effort.

This contractor is working with a local university to set up a program where college students working as baggage handlers would earn a regular hourly wage and tuition reimbursements in lieu of benefits. Officials at this company told us that the use of baggage handlers would provide relief to current full-time screeners by relieving them of time spent carrying bags to and from checked baggage screening systems and enable them to focus more on screening functions. While this proposal has yet to be implemented, it demonstrates how private screening contractors might use their flexibility to recruit employees. In contrast, TSA officials told us that the agency has not established a tuition reimbursement program for federal screeners.

Selecting Screener Supervisors from Within

TSA describes its screening supervisors as the key to a strong defense in detecting threat objects. During the initial hiring of screeners, TSA's hiring contractor selected screener supervisors for both the airports with federal and private screeners. However, one of the private screening contractors did not hire screener supervisors directly through TSA's assessment center process, but instead hired all applicants as screeners and, after monitoring their performance, promoted screeners to the supervisor position. Thus, rather than accepting the decisions of TSA's hiring contractor regarding applicants who would be suitable supervisors, it determined which screeners should be made supervisors based on actual screener performance. This decision to promote from within gave the private screening contractor more decision-making authority in the staffing selection process. In contrast, many of the FSDs we interviewed and numerous FSDs who have responded to our FSD survey reported that they were dissatisfied with the quality of the screening supervisors initially assigned to the airport. FSDs have attempted to address this performance gap by conducting subsequent promotions based on their observations of screeners' ability to effectively supervise staff.

Little Information Exists to Measure Differences in Performance of Private and Federal Screeners

Little performance data are currently available to compare the performance of private screeners and federal screeners in detecting threat objects. The primary source of performance data currently available is the results of the covert tests performed by TSA's OIAPR, in which TSA undercover agents attempt to pass threat objects through screening checkpoints and in checked baggage. However, relatively limited testing has been conducted to date. Although the results of the covert testing cannot be generalized either to the airports in which the tests have been conducted or to airports nationwide, they provide an indicator of screener performance in detecting threat objects. The results indicate that, in

general, private and federal screeners performed similarly. Specifically, the covert testing identified weaknesses in the ability of both private and federal screeners to detect threat objects. TSA is in the process of collecting and analyzing additional performance data on screener performance, including data from the Threat Image Projection (TIP) system, which places images of threat objects on the x-ray screen during actual operations and records whether screeners identify threat objects, and the annual screener recertification program. TSA has recognized the need to enhance screener performance and has taken steps in this direction, including enhancing its recurrent training program.

TSA Has Enhanced Efforts to Measure Screener Performance

TSA recognized the need to strengthen its assessment of the private and federal screener workforces and has taken action in this vein. Specifically, TSA has increased its covert testing, fully activated TIP and deployed a new library of 2,400 TIP images, and implemented the screener recertification program. However, with the exception of the covert testing and recent TIP data, data are not yet available to assess how well screeners are performing; how the performance of federal and private screeners compare; and what steps, if any, TSA needs to take to improve performance. In September 2003, TSA also hired BearingPoint, a consultant, to evaluate the performance of the contract screening program. The consultant's report was delivered to TSA on April 9, 2004, but TSA has not yet publicly released the results of the study.

Covert Testing

TSA's OIAPR conducts unannounced covert tests of screeners to assess their ability to detect threat objects and adherence to TSA-approved procedures. These tests, in which undercover OIAPR inspectors attempt to pass threat objects through screening checkpoints and in checked baggage, are designed to identify systematic problems affecting the performance of screeners in the areas of training, policy, and technology.[23] Currently, OIAPR's covert test results are the primary available data source on screener performance in detecting threat objects. However, relatively limited testing has been conducted to date. Between September 9, 2002, and February 1, 2004, OIAPR conducted 1,164 checkpoint tests on passenger screeners at 127 airports and 245 tests on baggage screeners at

[23]The descriptions of OIAPR's various covert tests are classified. OIAPR designs its covert testing methods based, in part, on intelligence regarding the most recent threats.

119 airports.[24] Of the 1,164 checkpoint tests OIAPR conducted, 98 were performed at the 5 pilot program airports and 1,066 were performed at airports with federal screeners. Of the 245 checked baggage tests, 10 were performed at the 5 pilot program airports and 235 were performed at airports with federal screeners. Overall, these tests have shown weaknesses in both private and federal screeners' ability to detect threat objects. While the results of OIAPR's covert tests cannot be generalized either to the airports in which the tests have been conducted or to airports nationwide, they provide an indicator of screener performance in detecting threat objects. The results indicate that, in general, private and federal screeners performed similarly. Specifically, the testing identified weaknesses in the ability of both private and federal screeners to detect threat objects. Similar testing conducted by the Department of Homeland Security's Office of Inspector General has also identified comparable screener performance weaknesses.

OIAPR initially focused most of its resources on testing passenger rather than baggage screeners. While OIAPR began conducting covert tests of passenger screeners in September 2002, it did not begin conducting covert tests of checked baggage screeners until January 2003. Consequently, OIAPR has collected less data related to the performance of baggage screeners. OIAPR has increased the number of checkpoint and checked baggage tests it conducts in recent months. Additionally, TSA is developing protocols to help FSDs conduct their own airport level screening testing—a practice that TSA had previously prohibited at all airports, including those with private screeners.

TIP System

Another key source of information on screener performance in detecting threat objects is the results from the TIP system. TIP is designed to test screeners' detection capabilities by projecting threat images, including guns and explosives, into bags as they are screened during actual operations. Screeners are responsible for positively identifying the threat image and calling for the bag to be searched. Once prompted, TIP identifies to the screener whether the threat is real and then records the screener's performance in a database that could be analyzed for

[24]As of February 1, 2004, OIAPR conducted covert tests at 137 airports, of which 109 included tests of both passenger and checked baggage screening. Additionally, OIAPR conducted repeat testing at 27 airports—2 of which were tested three times and 25 of which were tested twice. Of the 5 pilot program airports, 1 was tested 3 times and the remaining 4 were tested twice.

performance trends. TSA only recently began collecting and analyzing TIP data and TIP is not yet available for baggage screening.[25]

TSA is not currently using TIP data as a formal indicator of screener performance, but instead is using TIP to identify individual screeners' training needs in terms of identifying threat objects on the X-ray machine.[26] TSA recently completed deploying and activating TIP with the new library of 2,400 images at all but 1 of the more than 1,800 passenger screening lanes nationwide.[27] TSA considers February 2004 to be the first full month of TIP reporting with the new library of 2,400 images. TSA collected these data in early March 2004. Officials told us that they plan to analyze at least 3 months of data—February, March, and April 2004—to determine more precisely how the data can be used to measure screener performance in detecting threat objects and to validate what the data tells TSA about screener performance. Additionally, officials stated that they plan to use TIP as an evaluation tool once sufficient data are collected to establish firm performance standards.

Annual Recertification Program

A third indicator of screener performance is the results of the annual recertification testing. ATSA requires that TSA collect performance information on all screeners by conducting an annual proficiency evaluation to ensure each screener continues to meet all qualifications and standards related to the functions that he or she performs. To meet this requirement, TSA established an annual recertification program comprised of two assessment components, one of the screener's knowledge and skills and the other of the screener's performance. The knowledge and skills assessment program consists of three modules: (1) knowledge of standard operating procedures, (2) image recognition, and (3) practical demonstration of skills. As part of the performance assessment, screeners are rated on both organizational and individual goals, such as maintaining

[25]TSA officials stated that they are currently working to resolve technical challenges associated with using TIP for checked baggage screening on explosives detection systems (EDS) and have started EDS TIP image development. On April 15, TSA issued a request for proposal inviting EDS vendors and other third-party vendors to submit research proposals to improve TIP training technology for EDS.

[26]TSA officials said TIP performance information has been available to FSDs on a local level since full activation in January 2004.

[27]TIP is not yet operational at one airport (an airport with federal screeners) due to construction at the screening checkpoint to prepare for its installation. However, the TIP-ready X-ray machines have already been procured for the airport and will be installed once the construction issues have been resolved.

the nation's air security, vigilantly carrying out duties with utmost attention to tasks that will prevent security threats, and demonstrating the highest levels of courtesy to travelers to maximize their levels of satisfaction with screening services. To be certified, a screener must have passed all the applicable modules and have a rating of "met" or "exceeded" standards on their annual performance assessment.

Screeners have completed all three modules of the knowledge and skills assessment program. TSA is currently analyzing the results of the fiscal year 2004 recertification tests and plans to report on the results of the certification process to TSA's Acting Administrator in late April 2004.[28] The report will include the results of all three modules of the knowledge and skills assessment tests, the outcomes of screener performance assessments, and the total number of screeners terminated due to failure to successfully pass the recertification program.[29]

TSA Efforts to Enhance Performance of Private and Federal Screeners

In October 2003, TSA began implementing a screening performance improvement program for private and federal screeners. The goal of the program is to improve screener performance through several training and management initiatives, including increasing covert testing at screening checkpoints, completing installation of TIP at all airports, enhancing screener training, and strengthening supervisors' skills through leadership and technical training. As part of TSA's efforts to enhance screener performance, TSA requires all screeners to participate in 3 hours of training per week averaged over each quarter. One hour is required to be devoted to X-ray image interpretation and the other 2 hours to screening techniques or reviews of standard operating procedures. TSA recently provided FSDs at all airports, including airports with private screeners, with additional training tools. Specifically, according to TSA officials, TSA has

- provided every airport, including the 5 pilot program airports, with at least one Modular Bomb Set (MBS II) kit—containing components of an improvised explosive device—and one weapons training kit, in part

[28]Screeners certified at the end of their on-the-job training on or before June 30, 2003, must complete the fiscal year 2004 recertification program. All other screeners are to participate in the annual certification process for fiscal year 2005.

[29]Based on the results of the screener recertification testing, TSA officials anticipate terminating less than 1 percent of the screener workforce due to failure to successfully pass the recertification testing.

because screeners had consistently told OIAPR inspectors that they would like more training with test objects similar to ones used in the tests;[30]

- instituted a program called "Threat in the Spotlight" that, based on intelligence TSA receives, provides screeners with the latest in threat information regarding terrorist attempts to get threat objects past screening checkpoints;
- established video training and fielded the first two videos in the series; and
- fielded an Online Learning Center—a Web based tool with 366 self-guided training courses available to all screening staff, including staff at the 5 pilot program airports.

As we reported in February 2004,[31] staffing shortages and lack of high-speed connectivity[32] at airport training facilities have made it difficult for screeners to fully utilize these programs. According to TSA officials, the Online Learning Center is now available via the Internet and the Intranet; therefore the issues of connectivity have been mitigated.[33] In January 2004, OIAPR began to gather data on selected training initiatives and to conduct repeat covert testing at airports. At each of the airports OIAPR visited to conduct covert tests between January 5, 2004, and February 1, 2004, OIAPR inspectors interviewed screeners about whether they had participated in the training initiatives. Based on these interviews, OIAPR found that the training initiatives they discussed with the screeners had not been fully implemented at every airport.

TSA officials said that they have begun to focus attention on airports where screeners performed particularly poorly on covert tests. For example, TSA officials said that mobile training assist teams were deployed in November 2003 to identify causes of poor performance at these airports and work with FSDs to devise and implement solutions. Additionally, in January 2004, OIAPR began conducting repeat covert

[30]The MBS II and weapons training kits were fielded to airports to address the identified training gap by allowing screeners to see and feel the threat objects that they are looking for. These kits contain some of the test objects used by OIAPR to conduct the covert testing.

[31]GAO-04-440T.

[32]High-speed connectivity refers to broadband access to TSA's field operations training sites and checkpoints.

[33]TSA officials stated that the Chief Information Officer's office is currently working with FSDs who have not received high-speed connectivity to identify alternative means of connectivity.

testing at airports to determine whether TSA's initiatives designed to enhance screener performance, such as additional recurrent training, have in fact improved performance.[34] Furthermore, FSDs are to be held accountable for screening performance and delivery of security. Specifically, annual performance assessments for all FSDs are to be tied to the overall performance level of their screeners as well as to their ability to address deficiencies quickly and adequately.

Despite its efforts to collect screener performance data and enhance screener performance, TSA officials acknowledged that they had not established overall performance targets by which to assess whether screeners within and across airports are achieving a desired level of performance. However, TSA has made progress in establishing performance standards for one screening function—X-ray image interpretation. In March 2004, TSA established interim TIP performance standards and plans to finalize these standards in May 2004. TSA is currently considering developing performance indexes for representing the performance of passenger and baggage screeners. During the remainder of our review, we plan to continue to examine TSA's efforts to measure screeners' performance, establish performance standards, and assess the performance of the private screening pilot program. As part of this effort, we will review the results of the BearingPoint, Inc. evaluation of the private screening pilot program, which was provided to TSA on April 9, 2004.

Concluding Observations

The private screening pilot program was not established in a way to enable an effective evaluation of the differences in the performance of federal and private screening and the reasons for those differences. In developing the pilot program, TSA did not develop an evaluation plan or performance targets by which to assess how the performance of federal and private screening compares. Additionally, TSA did not collect data in ways that would enable it to reach generalizable conclusions about the performance of private screeners. Further, the program was not designed to achieve its intended mission, as defined by TSA—to test the effectiveness of increased operational flexibility at the airport level that contractors may provide. Key operational areas, such as staffing and training have to a

[34]Between January 5, 2004, and February 1, 2004, OIAPR conducted repeat testing at 15 airports. OIAPR officials reported that they conducted repeat testing at an additional 29 airports between February 2, 2004, and March 31, 2004.

large extent been held constant across all airports, and therefore, are not within the control of the private screening contractors. Therefore, it is not surprising that TSA's available screener performance data indicate little difference between federal or private screeners in detecting threat objects. It would have been informative to have an evaluation of a true pilot program where the private screening contractors were provided with operational flexibility that could assist in identifying practices that lead to improved screener performance and higher security at the most efficient cost to the taxpayer. Without data to better assess the performance of private screening operations and flexible practices, TSA and airport operators have little information on which to plan for the possible transition of airports from a federal system to a private screening contractor. We will continue our work and make recommendations for TSA actions, as appropriate, in a future report.

Mr. Chairman, this concludes my statement. I would be pleased to answer any questions that you or other members of the subcommittee may have at this time.

Contact Information and Acknowledgements

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