RAIL TRANSIT

Observations on FTA's State Safety Oversight Program

Why GAO Did This Study

The U.S. rail transit system is a vital component of the nation's transportation infrastructure, carrying millions of people daily. Unlike most transportation modes, safety and security oversight of rail transit is the responsibility of state-designated oversight agencies following Federal Transit Administration (FTA) requirements. In addition, in 2001, Congress passed the Aviation and Transportation Security Act, giving the Transportation Security Administration (TSA) authority for security over all transportation modes, including rail transit.

This testimony is based on ongoing work for this subcommittee's committee—the House Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure. I describe (1) how the State Safety Oversight program is designed; (2) what is known about the impact of the program on rail safety and security; and (3) challenges facing the program. I also provide information about oversight of transit systems that cross state boundaries. To address these issues, we reviewed program documents and interviewed stakeholders including officials from FTA, TSA, the National Transportation Safety Board, and the American Public Transportation Association. We also surveyed state oversight and transit agencies covered by FTA's program, interviewing 24 of the 25 oversight agencies and 37 of 42 transit agencies across the country.

www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-06-997T.

To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on the link above. For more information, contact Katherine Siggerud on (202) 512-2834 or siggerudk@gao.gov.
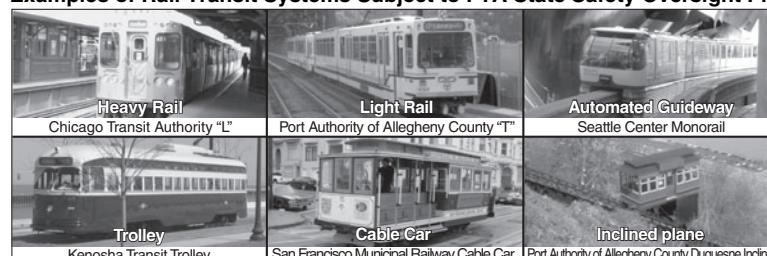
What GAO Found

FTA designed the State Safety Oversight program as one in which FTA, other federal agencies, states, and rail transit agencies collaborate to ensure the safety and security of rail transit systems. FTA requires states to designate an agency to oversee the safety and security of rail transit agencies that receive federal funding. Oversight agencies are responsible for overseeing transit agencies, including reviewing transit agencies' safety and security plans. While oversight agencies are to include security reviews as part of their responsibilities, the TSA also has security oversight authority over transit agencies.

Officials from 23 of the 24 oversight agencies and 35 of the 37 transit agencies with whom we spoke found the program worthwhile. Several transit agencies cited improvements through the oversight program, such as reductions in derailments, fires, and collisions. While there is ample anecdotal evidence suggesting the benefits of the program, FTA has not definitively shown the program's benefits and has not developed performance goals for the program, to be able to track performance as required by Congress. Also, because FTA was reevaluating the program after the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, FTA did not keep to its stated 3-year schedule for auditing state oversight agencies, resulting in a lack of information to track the program's trends. FTA officials recognize it will be difficult to develop performance measures and goals to help determine the program's impact, especially since fatalities and incidents involving rail transit are already low. However, FTA has assigned this task to a contractor and has stated that the program's new leadership will make auditing oversight agencies a top priority.

FTA faces some challenges in managing and implementing the program. First, expertise varies across oversight agencies. Specifically, officials from 16 of 24 oversight agencies raised concerns about not having enough qualified staff. Officials from transit and oversight agencies with whom we spoke stated that oversight and technical training would help address this variation. Second, transit and oversight agencies are confused about what role oversight agencies are to play in overseeing rail security, since TSA has hired rail inspectors to perform a potentially similar function, which could result in duplication of effort.

Examples of Rail Transit Systems Subject to FTA State Safety Oversight Program

Heavy Rail	Light Rail	Automated Guideway
Chicago Transit Authority "L"	Port Authority of Allegheny County "T"	Seattle Center Monorail
Trolley	Cable Car	Inclined plane
Kenosha Transit Trolley	San Francisco Municipal Railway Cable Car	Port Authority of Allegheny County Duquesne Incline

Source: Pennsylvania DOT; Seattle Center Monorail; San Francisco Municipal Railway; GAO.

United States Government Accountability Office