



Highlights of [GAO-09-903T](#), a testimony before the Subcommittee on Management, Investigations, and Oversight, Committee on Homeland Security, House of Representatives

## Why GAO Did This Study

By deploying armed air marshals onboard selected flights, the Federal Air Marshal Service (FAMS), a component of the Transportation Security Administration (TSA), plays a key role in helping to protect approximately 29,000 domestic and international flights operated daily by U.S. air carriers. This testimony discusses (1) FAMS's operational approach or "concept of operations" for covering flights, (2) an independent evaluation of the operational approach, and (3) FAMS's processes and initiatives for addressing workforce-related issues. Also, this testimony provides a list of possible oversight issues related to FAMS.

This testimony is based on GAO's January 2009 report (GAO-09-273), with selected updates in July 2009. For its 2009 report, GAO analyzed policies and procedures regarding FAMS's operational approach and a July 2006 classified assessment of that approach. Also, GAO analyzed employee working group reports and related FAMS's initiatives for addressing workforce-related issues, and interviewed FAMS headquarters officials and 67 air marshals (selected to reflect a range in levels of experience).

## What GAO Recommends

GAO's January 2009 report (GAO-09-273) recommended actions for improving the design and response rates of FAMS's workforce satisfaction surveys. TSA agreed, and FAMS has begun steps to implement these actions.

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## FEDERAL AIR MARSHAL SERVICE

### Actions Taken to Fulfill Core Mission and Address Workforce Issues

#### What GAO Found

Because the number of air marshals is less than the number of daily flights, FAMS's operational approach is to assign air marshals to selected flights it deems high risk—such as the nonstop, long-distance flights targeted on September 11, 2001. In assigning air marshals, FAMS seeks to maximize coverage of flights in 10 targeted high-risk categories, which are based on consideration of threats, vulnerabilities, and consequences.

In July 2006, the Homeland Security Institute, a federally funded research and development center, independently assessed FAMS's operational approach and found it to be reasonable. However, the institute noted that certain types of flights were covered less often than others. The institute recommended that FAMS increase randomness or unpredictability in selecting flights and otherwise diversify the coverage of flights within the various risk categories. In its January 2009 report, GAO noted that the Homeland Security Institute's evaluation methodology was reasonable and that FAMS had taken actions (or had ongoing efforts) to implement the institute's recommendations.

To address workforce-related issues, FAMS's previous Director, who served until June 2008, established a number of processes and initiatives, such as working groups, listening sessions, and an internal Web site for agency personnel to provide anonymous feedback to management. These efforts have produced some positive results. For example, FAMS revised its policy for airport check-in and aircraft boarding procedures to help protect the anonymity of air marshals in mission status, and FAMS modified its mission scheduling processes and implemented a voluntary lateral transfer program to address certain quality-of-life issues. The air marshals GAO interviewed expressed satisfaction with FAMS's efforts to address workforce-related issues. The current FAMS Director has expressed a commitment to continue applicable processes and initiatives. Also, FAMS has plans to conduct a workforce satisfaction survey of all employees every 2 years, building upon an initial survey conducted in fiscal year 2007. GAO's review found that the potential usefulness of future surveys could be enhanced by ensuring that the survey questions and the answer options are clearly structured and unambiguous and that additional efforts are considered for obtaining the highest possible response rates.

To its credit, FAMS has made progress in addressing various operational and quality-of-life issues that affect the ability of air marshals to perform their aviation security mission. However, sustaining progress will require ongoing consideration by FAMS management—and continued oversight by congressional stakeholders—of key questions, such as how to foster career sustainability for air marshals given that maintaining an effective operational tempo can at times be incompatible with supporting a work-life balance.