United States General Accounting Office 140213

GAO Testimony

For Release
on Delivery
Expected at
10:00 a.m. EDT
Monday
December 18, 1989

Proactive Management of FAA's Security Program Needed

Statement of
Kenneth M. Mead
Director, Transportation Issues
Resources, Community, and Economic
Development Division

Before the
President's Commission on Aviation Security
and Terrorism

Madam Chairwoman and Members of the Commission:

We appreciate the opportunity to testify on GAO's work on aviation security before the Commission on Aviation Security and Terrorism. Our work directly pertains to a major area of interest to the Commission--the adequacy of Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) policies and procedures in preventing criminal acts against aviation.

Our recent work in evaluating FAA's domestic and international security programs has found fundamental deficiencies primarily in four areas of FAA's aviation security program, namely,

-- passenger screening,
-- airport security controls,
-- security inspections, and
-- airline training requirements for security personnel.

In recent years, aviation security has been a dynamic area and FAA's security program has correspondingly grown in size and complexity. Since 1985, the size of FAA's security staff has grown nearly three-fold and significant new responsibilities have been added related to such areas as foreign airport security assessments, expanded use of air marshals, and drug enforcement assistance. FAA's security program must be able to meet a more sophisticated terrorist threat through combining the introduction

of new explosive detection technology, such as thermal neutron analysis, with well-trained security personnel.

FAA has responded positively to a number of the recommendations we have previously made by taking action to improve its security program. Additionally, we believe that FAA needs to develop a proactive approach to security by establishing a quality assurance program capable of providing routine critical assessments of its security program to detect basic deficiencies such as those we found in passenger screening, airport security controls, the quality of inspections, and airline training. Also, FAA needs to work with foreign governments to identify emerging issues such as how to assure that foreign air carriers provide adequate security as more U.S. citizens use them for air travel. To its credit, FAA has taken some recent steps in this direction.

BACKGROUND

Since the need for special aviation security measures was first recognized in 1969, FAA has developed and administered programs to prevent criminal acts against aviation. Through FAA-approved Air Carrier Standard Security Program and airport security programs, air carriers and airport operators are responsible for implementing appropriate security measures. There are, however, major differences in responsibilities between domestic and foreign airports. At domestic airports, overall

responsibility for security is divided between the airport operators and the airlines. In general, airport operators are responsible for the police force and perimeter security, while the airlines are responsible for passenger and baggage screening.

At foreign airports, security is generally the responsibility of the host government. To bolster the overall security for U.S. airline passengers, FAA augments host country security at designated high-risk airports by requiring U.S. airlines to provide additional security measures. These measures include passenger questioning and physical searches of passengers and their carry-on baggage.

I would like to now discuss the fundamental security deficiencies we found.

PASSENGER SCREENING

We previously reported[1] on the preboard passenger screening process--a critical component of FAA's domestic aviation security program. Air carriers are responsible for screening passengers and their hand-carried items before they board an airplane. The purpose of passenger screening at U.S. airports is to prevent

---

[1]Aviation Security: FAA Preboard Passenger Screening Test Results (GAO/RCED-87-125FS, April 30, 1987).
Aviation Security: FAA Needs Preboard Passenger Screening Performance Standards (GAO/RCED-87-182, July 24, 1987).

firearms, explosives, and other dangerous weapons from being carried on board an airplane and endangering the traveling public.

In general, results of FAA's testing of passenger screening points and the results of our work showed that the passenger screening process could not ensure that firearms, explosives and other dangerous weapons were not being carried on board an airplane. On the basis of results of FAA tests conducted from September 1986 through June 1987, we reported that, overall, screening personnel detected approximately 80 percent of the dangerous test items. In addition, detection rates varied widely at the nation's major airports, ranging from a high of 99 percent at one airport to a low of 48 percent at another. The program's effectiveness was also hindered by high turnover, low wages, and inadequate training of screening personnel. It was clear that in many instances air carriers were not placing sufficient emphasis on security to ensure that passenger screening checkpoints operate at the highest level of performance.

We also found that air carriers had no clearly defined performance expectations for passenger screening checkpoints and FAA had no basis to take enforcement action when screening personnel failed to detect test weapons during FAA testing. The absence of a performance standard and lack of enforcement authority for dealing with substandard screening was a major deficiency and contributed significantly to longstanding screening problems. We

recommended that FAA establish a standard for preboard passenger screening that defines expected performance and then measure air carrier performance against this standard.

FAA concurred with our recommendations and in October 1987 established a 100 percent performance standard for passenger screening, requiring that screening systems detect all FAA test weapons. According to the FAA, dramatic and significant improvement has been made in airline detection rates since our report. For the first 10 months of 1989, FAA reported that the overall detection rate was about 92 percent. While detection rates between airports continue to vary, FAA's data show that nearly all major airports now have detection rates above 80 percent. Although we have not verified FAA's data, this improvement may be related to the fact that FAA now fines the air carriers $10,000 for each failed test whenever a screening checkpoint's performance falls below a 95 percent detection rate. As of September 1989, the total amount of fines FAA had levied for screening failures was about $6.4 million.

AIRPORT SECURITY CONTROLS

Our review[2] of FAA's domestic civil aviation security program included evaluating other security measures in place at the

---

[2]Aviation Security: Improved Controls Needed To Prevent Unauthorized Access at Key Airports (GAO/RCED-88-86, January 29, 1988).

nation's 16 category X airports (which are those airports perceived to carry the highest security risk). Chief among the problems we found were fundamental weaknesses in the controls over personnel identification systems and over access to those parts of the airport where aircraft operate.

In the context of aviation security, airports are typically divided into two parts: one part is the air operations area, which is the part of the airport where aircraft operate; and the second part covers the rest of the airport, predominantly the terminal, cargo areas, other structures such as those containing electrical systems and fuel tanks, and vehicle parking lots. FAA regulations mandate that access to the air operations area be controlled through various interrelated security features. These features are (1) the passenger screening process, (2) employee identification systems, (3) the requirement to challenge or question the presence of unauthorized persons in nonpublic areas, and (4) perimeter barriers such as fencing, fire doors, jetways, and employee waiting rooms.

During our review, we found serious basic security deficiencies in all of these features. FAA requirements for access to the operations area were not complied with and FAA oversight of compliance was insufficient. Using the results of FAA's own inspections, the DOT task force, and our own security tests, we found that access to the air operations area could easily

be gained because these features were not adequately controlled. For example, we found that, in general, airport officials could not account for personnel identification badges. Our verification of airport personnel identification records for four aviation service companies at one category X airport showed that three of the four companies had terminated employees and had reportedly returned the badges to the airport. Airport officials, however, had no records of the badges being returned, nor did we find any evidence that they were returned.

The impact of lax accountability over identification badges was underscored during our work related to the Pacific Southwest Airlines Flight 1771 incident. The incident occurred when a disgruntled former employee used an old identification badge to bypass security and board the flight with a handgun. During the flight, he shot the pilot, causing the plane to crash, killing all 43 people aboard. After this incident, FAA ordered the airlines to tighten procedures for recovering identification cards of former employees and informing security personnel when a worker is fired.

FAA is also now requiring airport operators to install and use a computer-controlled card system for access to restricted airport areas. The system will be installed at 269 of the nation's largest airports. The final rule on access was issued in January 1989, and, depending on the size of the airport, generally requires airports to have a system in place within one-and-a-half to two-

and-a-half years after FAA approval of airport plans. FAA has approved plans for only seven of the largest airports thus far.

SECURITY INSPECTIONS

We have also evaluated[3] the effectiveness of FAA's inspections in identifying and rectifying security deficiencies at domestic airports and FAA's approach in assessing foreign airport security. The major difference between FAA inspections of domestic and foreign airports is that, at foreign airports, FAA inspectors are not required to test the effectiveness of such security features as the preboard passenger screening process and procedures for preventing unauthorized access to restricted airport areas, as they are required to do at U.S. domestic airports. This is because FAA believes such independent testing is inappropriate due to sovereignty concerns and because of possible danger to inspectors.

Although testing of security procedures is required at domestic airports, we found that FAA's inspection process was insufficient to verify the adequacy of basic security features. Specifically, the inspection process did not include procedures or guidance on the extent of testing and/or verification needed to ensure the adequacy of certain security features such as locks and keys, and personnel and vehicle identification systems. Moreover,

---

[3]Aviation Security: Corrective Actions Underway, But Better Inspection Guidance Still Needed (GAO/RCED-88-160, August 23,1988).

none of the inspectors we observed during FAA inspections at six major airports tested or verified the accountability and control over these features. Instead, inspectors relied on airport or air carrier officials' verbal assertions and judgment regarding the adequacy of security features.

The lack of verification was also a problem with FAA's assessment of foreign airports. Our observation of assessments at five foreign airports[4] found that FAA inspectors did not observe and evaluate the security tests made by host country officials. For example, FAA inspectors did not observe or evaluate the results of host country testing to determine the effectiveness of the preboard passenger screening in detecting weapons or the effectiveness of procedures in preventing unauthorized entry into restricted airport areas.

By not verifying the adequacy of security controls and systems at domestic and foreign airports, FAA inspectors did not provide a true and complete assessment of the overall level of security on inspection reports. We recommended that FAA improve its aviation security inspection process at domestic category X airports by developing appropriate testing and verification procedures for lock and key controls and personnel and vehicle identification systems. We recommended that the foreign airport assessment process be

---

[4]Aviation Security: FAA's Assessment of Foreign Airports (GAO/RCED-89-45, December 7,1988).

strengthened by making analyses of host country security evaluations, including observing and evaluating host country testing, to assess the operational effectiveness of various security measures. FAA agreed with our recommendation and told us they plan to begin evaluating security testing at foreign airports in 1990.

AIRLINE TRAINING REQUIREMENTS

Following the loss of Pan Am Flight 103 over Scotland on December 21, 1988, FAA mandated additional security measures at certain high-risk airports in Western Europe and the Middle East. These measures required airlines to undertake additional procedures in screening and controlling checked and carry-on baggage, cargo, and battery operated or electronic devices. The measures were made part of the Air Carrier Standard Security Program, the FAA-approved program that delineates aviation security measures to be followed by all U.S. airlines at domestic and international airports.

The Air Carrier Standard Security Program identifies requirements for airline security at all domestic U.S. airports and stipulates additional security procedures that U.S. airlines must follow at high-risk foreign airports. In our opinion, effective implementation of security program measures is dependent on adequate guidance and training, and on the importance individual

airlines place on security. FAA identifies in the security program the core requirements and guidelines for the initial, recurrent, and on-the-job training of airline screening personnel at domestic airports. Our work has shown that the quality of this training varies widely between the airlines.

We testified on this subject on September 27, 1989, in executive session before the House Subcommittee on Government Activities and Transportation. Following this testimony, FAA began to identify similar training requirements and standards for the additional security measures required at high-risk foreign airports. Currently, each airline develops its own training program for additional screening at these airports. As a result, each airline has adopted different approaches for carrying out such procedures as additional questioning of passengers, profile application, and detection of plastic explosives. Moreover, FAA does not evaluate formal airline security training at high-risk foreign airports.

The importance of having a consistent set of training standards for required additional security measures at high-risk foreign airports was demonstrated by FAA's Pan Am 103 investigation. The investigation suggested that the security deficiencies found could be connected to breakdowns in airline training. For example, the investigation found that Pan Am security personnel failed to screen 31 passengers at Heathrow

Airport to determine whether they should have received additional screening. Our review of other FAA reports on airline security inspections found similar deficiencies related to training problems. In one inspection of an airline at a major foreign airport conducted immediately after the Pan Am 103 incident, airline security personnel failed to apply correct security questioning to over 30 passengers on 1 flight. In addition, they failed to ensure that 57 passengers identified for additional screening were properly searched.

FAA concurred with our conclusions and said that training requirements and standards would be established for the extra security measures required at high-risk foreign airports. In addition, FAA agreed to our recommendation that inspectors routinely evaluate formal airline security training provided to airline employees at high-risk foreign airports. FAA officials recently told us that they are currently in the process of making these changes.

NEED FOR PROACTIVE APPROACH

In addition to following through on our prior recommendations, our work in evaluating the adequacy of FAA aviation security policies and procedures has shown that FAA needs to be proactive, rather than reactive, in managing its security program to meet the ever-changing terrorist threat. In the areas we reviewed, FAA did

not have an adequate ongoing quality assurance program to identify fundamental deficiencies existing in its security program. Instead, basic deficiencies in several vital security areas such as passenger screening, airport security controls, inspections, and training were identified only through independent GAO and DOT studies, or following public outcry after a serious incident.

For example, the need for FAA to evaluate the quality of its inspection guidance did not surface until we reported that serious, basic weaknesses existed in the way inspectors tested and verified controls over airport keys and locks and personnel identification badges. Similarly, although FAA tested the preboard screening system, it had not established a performance standard to use as a basis for measuring performance and taking enforcement action. In addition, FAA did not strengthen procedures for controlling identification badges of terminated employees until after the Pacific Southwest Airlines flight 1771 incident. Further, FAA did not mandate additional security measures at high-risk foreign airports until after the Pan Am 103 disaster.

To its credit, FAA has taken recent steps to improve its ability to be proactive. During the past year, FAA established a program analysis group in its Office of Civil Aviation Security. The group, however, is not yet fully staffed. Another initiative just recently taken to enhance the security program was the establishment of a national Aviation Security Advisory Committee,

which includes members from other agencies as well as airport and airline special interest organizations. The committee's charter is to examine all areas of civil aviation security and provide recommendations for improving aviation security methods, equipment and procedures. We support these initiatives, but believe that they must be implemented in a timely manner so that the security program is able to keep up with the ever-changing threat and identify and correct deficiencies before another serious incident occurs.

This concludes our testimony, Madam Chairwoman. We will be happy to answer any questions you may have at this time.