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Accountability Integrity Reliability

Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-09-603](#), a report to Subcommittee on Highways and Transit, Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure, House of Representatives

Why GAO Did This Study

The Federal Transit Administration (FTA) oversees about \$5.5 billion in federal funds each year to transit agencies serving urban areas (grantee), in part through its triennial review program, which evaluates grantee adherence to federal requirements at least once every 3 years. GAO recommended in a 1998 oversight report that FTA improve the program.

The subcommittee requested that GAO review this program. GAO identified (1) the extent to which triennial reviews indicate that grantees met applicable federal requirements from fiscal years 2000 through 2008; (2) the strengths and weaknesses of the triennial review process; and (3) FTA's performance measures for the triennial review and the extent to which they meet key attributes of successful performance measures. GAO addressed these objectives by analyzing oversight data on 424 grantees that had three triennial reviews, reviewing triennial review reports and guidance, assessing FTA's performance measures; and interviewing FTA headquarters and regional officials, contractors who conduct the reviews, and grantees.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that FTA analyze oversight data to enhance grantees' performance, strengthen the triennial review process, and improve performance measures. The Department of Transportation reviewed a draft of this report and generally agreed with its contents and with GAO's recommendations.

To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on [GAO-09-603](#). For more information, contact Phillip R. Herr at (202) 512-2834 or herrp@gao.gov.

PUBLIC TRANSPORTATION

FTA's Triennial Review Program Has Improved, But Assessments of Grantees' Performance Could Be Enhanced

What GAO Found

GAO's analysis of FTA's triennial review oversight data found that over two-thirds of the 424 grantees analyzed have not consistently improved overall performance in terms of meeting more federal requirements from fiscal years 2000 through 2008. Fifty-one percent of grantees had mixed results in meeting requirements and 17 percent consistently met fewer requirements; while 31 percent consistently met more requirements—one of the goals of the triennial review program. (See figure 3). Executives from three grantees that met most requirements attributed their performance to, among other things, having job descriptions that link employee responsibilities to the triennial review—a practice they said contributed to a culture of accountability. During the same time, grantees had the greatest number of findings in 5 of 23 triennial review areas, including the procurement and drug and alcohol testing areas. While FTA helps grantees address findings, additional efforts to identify the underlying causes and the severity of findings could further benefit grantees.

FTA's triennial review program uses some strong management practices—having a well-defined process, using an information system to monitor grantees, and issuing reports timely. Still, two areas could be strengthened. First, while FTA is legislatively required to conduct a complete review of grantees' adherence to federal requirements at least once every 3 years, GAO identified a few instances where documentation does not clearly show that FTA reviewed all requirement areas. For example, 10 triennial review reports for 2008 showed that the drug and alcohol program area was “not reviewed.” FTA's practice is to review all areas, regardless of documentation, but because FTA's guidance is not clear about how to document the review of areas where FTA has conducted a related special review in the prior two years, a few grantees may not be reviewed for 5 years. FTA plans to revise its guidance to avoid ambiguity. Second, FTA is aware of the burden oversight reviews place on grantees and works to limit this burden. However, in a limited number of cases, FTA did not coordinate its special oversight reviews with the triennial review schedule, which may place undue burden on a few grantees receiving multiple oversight reviews in the same fiscal year.

FTA's two timeliness performance measures for assessing the triennial review program—(1) closing 80 percent of grantees' deficient findings within 30 days of their due date and (2) issuing 95 percent of the final triennial review reports within 30 days of completing a review—meet some, but not all key attributes of successful measures. (See figure 6). Although both measures link throughout the organization, have measurable targets, are clearly stated, and do not overlap, the “close findings” measure does not meet the objectivity and reliability attribute. For example, data inaccuracies in past “close findings” data raised questions about the reliability of the measure. Also, both measures do not assess the core program activity to evaluate grantees' performance or governmentwide priorities, such as the quality of the triennial review program, and thus, as a whole, are not balanced, making it difficult for managers to not overemphasize one priority at the expense of others.