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AVIATION SECURITY

Screener Training and Performance Measurement Strengthened, but More Work Remains

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Highlights

Highlights of GAO-05-457, a report to the Chairman, Subcommittee on Aviation, Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure, House of Representatives

Why GAO Did This Study

The screening of airport passengers and their checked baggage is a critical component in securing our nation's commercial aviation system. Since May 2003, GAO has issued six products related to screener training and performance. This report updates the information presented in the prior products and incorporates results from GAO's survey of 155 Federal Security Directors—the ranking Transportation Security Administration (TSA) authority responsible for the leadership and coordination of TSA security activities at the nation's commercial airports. Specifically, this report addresses (1) actions TSA has taken to enhance training for passenger and checked baggage screeners and screening supervisors, (2) how TSA ensures that screeners complete required training, and (3) actions TSA has taken to measure and enhance screener performance in detecting threat objects.

What GAO Recommends

GAO is recommending that the Secretary of Homeland Security direct TSA to develop a plan for completing the deployment of high-speed connectivity at airport training facilities, and establish and communicate appropriate internal controls for monitoring the completion of training.

TSA reviewed a draft of this report and generally agreed with GAO's findings and recommendations.

www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-05-457.

To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on the link above. For more information, contact Cathleen Berrick, 202-512-8777, berrickc@gao.gov.

What GAO Found

TSA has initiated a number of actions designed to enhance screener training, such as updating the basic screener training course. TSA also established a recurrent training requirement and introduced the Online Learning Center, which makes self-guided training courses available over TSA's intranet and the Internet. Even with these efforts, Federal Security Directors reported that insufficient screener staffing and a lack of high-speed Internet/intranet connectivity at some training facilities have made it difficult to fully utilize training programs and to meet the recurrent training requirement of 3 hours per week, averaged over a quarter year, within regular duty hours. TSA acknowledged that challenges exist in recurrent training delivery and is taking steps to address these challenges, including factoring training into workforce planning efforts and distributing training through written materials and CD-ROMs. However, TSA has not established a plan prioritizing the deployment of high-speed Internet/intranet connectivity to all airport training facilities to facilitate screener access to training materials.

TSA lacks adequate internal controls to provide reasonable assurance that screeners receive legislatively mandated basic and remedial training, and to monitor its recurrent training program. Specifically, TSA policy does not clearly specify the responsibility for ensuring that screeners have completed all required training. In addition, TSA officials have no formal policies or methods for monitoring the completion of required training and were unable to provide documentation identifying the completion of remedial training.

TSA has implemented and strengthened efforts to measure and enhance screener performance. For example, TSA has increased the number of covert tests it conducts at airports, which test screeners' ability to detect threat objects on passengers, in their carry-on baggage, and in checked baggage. These tests identified that overall, weaknesses and vulnerabilities continue to exist in passenger and checked baggage screening systems at airports of all sizes, at airports with federal screeners, and at airports with private-sector screeners. While these test results are an indicator of performance, they cannot solely be used as a comprehensive measure of any airport's screening performance or any individual screener's performance. We also found that TSA's efforts to measure and enhance screener performance have primarily focused on passenger screening, not checked baggage screening. For example, TSA only uses threat image software on passenger screening X-ray machines, and the recertification testing program does not include an image recognition module for checked baggage screeners. TSA is taking steps to address the overall imbalance in passenger and checked baggage screening performance data. TSA also established performance indexes for the passenger and checked baggage screening systems, to identify an overall desired level of performance. However, TSA has not established performance targets for each of the component indicators that make up the performance indexes, including performance targets for covert testing. TSA plans to finalize these targets by the end of fiscal year 2005.