

Why GAO Did This Study

Homeland security partnerships may grow increasingly important as fiscal constraints provide impetus for federal agencies to look to partners for mission support. One partner is CAP, a congressionally chartered, federally funded, nonprofit corporation with approximately 61,000 volunteer members that can function as the auxiliary of the U.S. Air Force. CAP conducts missions throughout the United States, including counterdrug, disaster relief, and search and rescue, using mostly single-engine aircraft. The conference report accompanying the fiscal year 2012 DHS appropriations act directed that GAO study the functions and capabilities of CAP to support homeland security missions. In response to the mandate, this report addresses (1) the extent to which CAP has been used to perform homeland security missions to date at the local, state, and federal levels, and (2) the factors that should be considered in determining CAP's ability to support additional homeland security missions and the extent to which DHS has assessed CAP's capabilities and resources to accomplish such missions. GAO reviewed laws and guidance; analyzed fiscal year 2011 CAP flight data; and interviewed officials from DHS, the Air Force, CAP, and a nongeneralizable sample of 10 of 52 state-level CAP wings.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that DHS, in coordination with the Air Force, cost-effectively assess the extent to which CAP can further assist DHS with future homeland security missions. DHS concurred with the recommendation.

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HOMELAND SECURITY

Civil Air Patrol Involved in Certain Missions, but DHS Should Assess the Benefits of Further Involvement

What GAO Found

The Civil Air Patrol (CAP) has performed certain homeland security missions for federal, state, and local customers, but devotes the majority of its flying hours to training and youth programs. Several of CAP's mission areas fit within the Department of Homeland Security's (DHS) definition of homeland security, as found in the *Quadrennial Homeland Security Review Report* (QHSR)—a strategic framework for homeland security. For example, CAP disaster assistance and air defense activities relate to the QHSR mission areas of ensuring resilience to disasters and preventing terrorism and enhancing security, respectively. CAP has performed some of these activities in support of DHS components, including the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP), and the Coast Guard, as well as state and local governments. For example, CAP has provided disaster imagery to FEMA, performed certain border reconnaissance for CBP, and assisted the Coast Guard in providing air support during the Deepwater Horizon oil spill. CAP has also performed homeland security-related activities for other customers, such as the U.S. Air Force. For example, 9 of the 10 CAP wings GAO spoke with had participated in military readiness exercises where CAP aircraft provided mock targets for military interceptor aircraft or ground-based radar. CAP's participation in homeland security activities accounted for approximately 9 percent of its fiscal year 2011 flying hours, but the majority of its flying hours (approximately 63 percent) were devoted to training and flying orientation, with the remaining devoted to other activities such as counterdrug and maintenance.

Several factors affect CAP's ability to support homeland security missions, and DHS and its components have not yet assessed how CAP could be used to perform certain homeland security missions. These factors—including legal parameters, mission funding, existing capabilities, and capacity—were issues cited by the DHS components and Air Force and CAP officials GAO contacted that could affect CAP's suitability for additional homeland security missions. For example, as an Air Force auxiliary, CAP is subject to laws and regulations governing the use of the military in support of law enforcement, which, among other things, allow CAP to conduct aerial surveillance in certain situations, but preclude its participation in the interdiction of vehicles, vessels, or aircraft. Similarly, while CAP's existing operational capabilities—aircraft and vehicles, personnel, and technology—position it well to support certain homeland security missions, they also limit its suitability for others. For example, FEMA officials cited the role of CAP imagery in providing useful situational awareness during the initial stages of some past natural disasters, while, in contrast, officials from CBP and the Coast Guard noted limitations such as inadequate imagery capabilities and insufficient detection technology. Although the components we contacted provided varying opinions regarding CAP's suitability for certain homeland security activities, DHS has not assessed CAP's capabilities and resources or determined the extent to which CAP could be used to support future homeland security activities. By assessing the ability of CAP to provide additional homeland security capabilities in a budget-constrained environment, DHS in coordination with the Air Force could position itself to better understand, and potentially utilize, another resource to accomplish its homeland security missions.