

## Why GAO Did This Study

TSA, which screens or oversees the screening of over 650 million air passengers per year, has processes for addressing complaints about air passengers' screening experience at checkpoints, but concerns have been raised about these processes. The Conference Report accompanying the Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2012, directed TSA to ensure the traveling public is aware of these processes and GAO to review TSA's policies and procedures for resolving passenger complaints. This report addresses the extent to which TSA has (1) policies and processes to guide the receipt of air passenger screening complaints and use of this information to monitor or enhance screening operations, (2) a consistent process for informing passengers about how to make complaints, and (3) complaint resolution processes that conform to independence standards. To address these objectives, GAO reviewed TSA documentation, analyzed complaint data from October 2009 through June 2012, and interviewed TSA officials from headquarters offices and six airports selected for type of security, among other things. The airport interviews are not generalizable but provide insights.

## What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that TSA, among other actions, establish (1) a consistent policy for receiving complaints, (2) a process to systematically analyze information on complaints from all mechanisms, and (3) a policy for informing passengers about the screening complaint processes and mechanisms to share best practices among airports. TSA concurred and is taking actions in response.

View [GAO-13-43](#). For more information, contact Stephen M. Lord at (202) 512-4379 or [lords@gao.gov](mailto:lords@gao.gov).

## AIR PASSENGER SCREENING

### Transportation Security Administration Could Improve Complaint Processes

## What GAO Found

The Transportation Security Administration (TSA) receives thousands of air passenger screening complaints through five mechanisms, but does not have an agencywide policy or consistent processes to guide receipt and use of such information. For example, from October 2009 through June 2012, TSA received more than 39,000 screening complaints through its TSA Contact Center (TCC). However, the data from the five mechanisms do not reflect the full nature and extent of complaints because local TSA staff have discretion in implementing TSA's complaint processes, including how they receive and document complaints. For example, comment cards are used at four of the six airports GAO contacted, but TSA does not have a policy requiring that complaints submitted using the cards be tracked or reported centrally. A consistent policy to guide all TSA efforts to receive and document complaints would improve TSA's oversight of these activities and help ensure consistent implementation. TSA also uses TCC data to inform the public about air passenger screening complaints, monitor operational effectiveness of airport security checkpoints, and make changes as needed. However, TSA does not use data from its other four mechanisms, in part because the complaint categories differ, making data consolidation difficult. A process to systematically collect information from all mechanisms, including standard complaint categories, would better enable TSA to improve operations and customer service.

TSA has several methods to inform passengers about its complaint processes, but does not have an agencywide policy or mechanism to ensure consistent use of these methods among commercial airports. For example, TSA has developed standard signs, stickers, and customer comment cards that can be used at airport checkpoints to inform passengers about how to submit feedback to TSA; however, GAO found inconsistent use at the six airports it contacted. For example, two airports displayed customer comment cards at the checkpoint, while at two others the cards were provided upon request. Passengers may be reluctant to ask for such cards, however, according to TSA. TSA officials at four of the six airports also said that the agency could do more to share best practices for informing passengers about complaint processes. Policies for informing the public about complaint processes and mechanisms for sharing best practices among local TSA officials could help provide TSA reasonable assurance that these activities are being conducted consistently and help local TSA officials learn from one another about what practices work well.

TSA's complaint resolution processes do not fully conform to standards of independence to ensure that these processes are fair, impartial, and credible, but the agency is taking steps to improve independence. Specifically, TSA airport officials responsible for resolving air passenger complaints are generally in the same chain of command as TSA airport staff who are the subjects of the complaints. TSA is developing a new process that could help ensure greater independence by TSA units referring air passenger complaints directly to its Ombudsman Division and by providing passengers an independent avenue to make complaints to that division. TSA also plans to initiate a program by January 2013 in which selected TSA airport staff are to be trained as passenger advocates as a collateral duty. It is too early to assess the extent to which these initiatives will help mitigate possible concerns about independence.