



Highlights of GAO-10-401T, a statement for the record to the Committee on Homeland Security, House of Representatives

## Why GAO Did This Study

The December 25, 2009, attempted bombing of flight 253 raised questions about the federal government's ability to protect the homeland and secure the commercial aviation system. This statement focuses on the government's efforts to use the terrorist watchlist to screen individuals and determine if they pose a threat, and how failures in this process contributed to the December 25 attempted attack. This statement also addresses the Transportation Security Administration's (TSA) planned deployment of technologies for enhanced explosive detection and the challenges associated with this deployment. GAO's comments are based on products issued from September 2006 through October 2009 and selected updates in January 2010. For these updates, GAO reviewed government reports related to the December 25 attempted attack and obtained information from the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) and TSA on use of the watchlist and new technologies for screening airline passengers.

## What GAO Recommends

GAO is not making new recommendations, but has made recommendations in prior reports to DHS, the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), and the White House Homeland Security Council to enhance the use of the watchlist and to TSA related to checkpoint technologies. The agencies generally agreed and are making some progress, but full implementation is needed.

View GAO-10-401T or key components. For more information, contact Eileen Larence at (202) 512-6510 or [larencee@gao.gov](mailto:larencee@gao.gov) and Stephen Lord at (202) 512-4379 or [lords@gao.gov](mailto:lords@gao.gov).

## HOMELAND SECURITY

### Better Use of Terrorist Watchlist Information and Improvements in Deployment of Passenger Checkpoint Technologies Could Further Strengthen Security

#### What GAO Found

The intelligence community uses standards of reasonableness to evaluate individuals for nomination to the consolidated terrorist watchlist. In making these determinations, agencies are to consider information from all available sources. However, for the December 25 subject, the intelligence community did not effectively complete these steps and link available information to the subject before the incident. Therefore, agencies did not nominate the individual to the watchlist or any of the subset lists used during agency screening, such as the "No Fly" list. Weighing and responding to the potential impacts that changes to the nomination criteria would have on the traveling public will be an important consideration in determining what changes may be needed. Also, screening agencies stated that they do not check against all records in the watchlist, partly because screening against certain records may not be needed to support a respective agency's mission or may not be possible because of the requirements of computer programs used to check individuals against watchlist records. In October 2007, GAO reported that not checking against all records may pose a security risk and recommended that DHS and the FBI assess potential vulnerabilities, but they have not completed these assessments. TSA is implementing an advanced airline passenger prescreening program—known as Secure Flight—that could potentially result in the federal government checking passengers against the entire watchlist under certain security conditions. Further, the government lacks an up-to-date strategy and implementation plan—supported by a clearly defined leadership or governance structure—which are needed to enhance the effectiveness of terrorist-related screening and ensure accountability. In the 2007 report, GAO recommended that the Homeland Security Council ensure that a governance structure exists that has the requisite authority over the watchlist process. The council did not comment on this recommendation.

As GAO reported in October 2009, since TSA's creation, 10 passenger screening technologies have been in various phases of research, development, procurement, and deployment, including the Advanced Imaging Technology (AIT)—formerly known as the Whole Body Imager. TSA expects to have installed almost 200 AITs in airports by the end of calendar year 2010 and plans to install a total of 878 units by the end of fiscal year 2014. In October 2009, GAO reported that TSA had not yet conducted an assessment of the technology's vulnerabilities to determine the extent to which a terrorist could employ tactics that would evade detection by the AIT. Thus, it is unclear whether the AIT or other technologies would have detected the weapon used in the December 25 attempted attack. GAO's report also noted the problems TSA experienced in deploying another checkpoint technology that had not been tested in the operational environment. Since GAO's October report, TSA stated that it has completed the testing as of the end of 2009. We are currently verifying that all functional requirements of the AIT were tested in an operational environment. Completing these steps should better position TSA to ensure that its costly deployment of AIT machines will enhance passenger checkpoint security.