

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-13-629](#), a report to the Ranking Member, Committee on Homeland Security, House of Representatives

Why GAO Did This Study

TSA implements programs that, for example, ensure individuals with unescorted access to secure areas of the nation's critical transportation infrastructure do not pose a security threat. Key to these programs are security threat assessments that screen individuals for links to terrorism, criminal history, and immigration status. TSA's Adjudication Center serves as the primary operational component in this process. GAO was asked to examine the performance and staffing strategy of the center. This report addresses the extent to which 1) TSA has measured performance for the center and what the data show; 2) TSA offices have coordinated to meet security threat assessment workload; and 3) TSA addressed potential risks posed by using a mix of government employees and contractors to adjudicate security threat assessments. GAO analyzed TSA data describing the center's performance since October 2010; reviewed documentation, including staffing plans; and interviewed TSA officials about data measurement and staffing practices.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that TSA, among other things: direct the Adjudication Center to calculate an accuracy rate that includes adjudicator performance for cases where applicants were both approved and disqualified; share adjudicator staffing plans among key program offices; and update its Adjudication Center workforce conversion plan and provide it to DHS for review and approval. DHS concurred with our recommendations.

View [GAO-13-629](#). For more information, contact Jennifer A. Grover at (202) 512-7141 or groverj@gao.gov.

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TRANSPORTATION SECURITY

Action Needed to Strengthen TSA's Security Threat Assessment Process

What GAO Found

The Transportation Security Administration's (TSA) Adjudication Center performance data show mixed results, and the center's performance measurement practices have limitations. The Adjudication Center relies on contractors to adjudicate security threat assessments and uses three primary measures to evaluate their performance—timeliness for completing adjudication, adjudication accuracy, and caseload status. GAO found that the Adjudication Center contractor met its timeliness and accuracy measures, but faced challenges in meeting its caseload measure. The Adjudication Center's timeliness and accuracy measures did not capture key data. According to TSA officials, the Adjudication Center's accuracy rate is based on a review of all cases where adjudicators had disqualified an applicant. However, this calculation generally does not include the accuracy rate for those applicants adjudicators had approved—which account for roughly 90 percent of the Adjudication Center's caseload. In this way, the accuracy rate provides a limited assessment of adjudicator performance. By developing an accuracy rate that includes data on both incorrectly disqualified and incorrectly approved applicants, TSA can better identify and address performance issues among its workforce.

Two TSA offices that share responsibility for implementing security threat assessments—the Program Management Division in the Office of Intelligence and Analysis and the Adjudication Center in the Office of Law Enforcement/Federal Air Marshal Service—can improve coordination on workforce planning. While the offices share information on workload completion, they do not have a process in place to ensure that information in the Adjudication Center's staffing plan—which the Adjudication Center periodically updates to reflect caseload projections and associated staffing needs—reflects the mutual understanding of both offices. For example, program managers in the Office of Intelligence and Analysis reported to GAO that they were unfamiliar with the staffing plan and they disagreed with workload projections in the plan. Establishing a mechanism for the offices to share and reconcile information in the plan can help better support the Adjudication Center's workforce planning.

TSA has been delayed in addressing risks posed by using contractors to adjudicate security threat assessments. In October 2011 TSA's Balanced Workforce Strategy Working Group completed its assessment for the Adjudication Center and determined that an excessive risk exists by allowing contractors to make security threat assessment approvals without sufficient federal oversight. The Working Group recommended that TSA convert to an all government workforce. According to a May 2012 implementation plan, TSA planned to convert this workforce by the end of calendar year 2013. However, delays have rendered the timelines and cost information in its plan outdated and TSA has not updated the plan or determined a revised implementation schedule. Completing this review and updating the plan would help TSA and Department of Homeland Security (DHS) decision makers by providing a roadmap for moving forward. Finally, providing this plan to DHS for review will be important to help ensure TSA can begin its conversion and mitigate identified risks of using contract adjudicators to conduct security threat assessments.