

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-16-764](#), a report to congressional requesters

Why GAO Did This Study

FAMS, within TSA, is the federal entity responsible for promoting confidence in the nation's aviation system through deploying air marshals to protect U.S. air carriers, airports, passengers, and crews.

GAO was asked to assess FAMS's training program for federal air marshals. This report examines (1) how TSA assesses the training needs of air marshal candidates and incumbent air marshals, and any opportunities that exist to improve this assessment, and (2) the extent to which FAMS ensures that incumbent air marshals are mission ready.

GAO analyzed FAMS training data for calendar year 2014, the last year of available data, reviewed TSA, OTD and DHS guidance and policies on FAMS's air marshal training program, interviewed TSA and FAMS headquarters officials, and visited the TSA Training Center and 7 of FAMS 22 field offices selected based on size and geographic dispersion.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that OTD implement a mechanism for regularly collecting incumbent air marshals' feedback on their recurrent training, and take steps to improve the response rates of training surveys it conducts. GAO also recommends that FAMS specify in policy who at the headquarters level has oversight responsibility for ensuring that recurrent training records are entered in a timely manner, and develop and implement standardized methods to determine whether incumbent air marshals continue to be mission ready in key skills. DHS concurred with all of the recommendations.

View [GAO-16-764](#). For more information, contact Jenny Grover at (202) 512-7141 or groverj@gao.gov.

September 2016

FEDERAL AIR MARSHAL SERVICE

Additional Actions Needed to Ensure Air Marshals' Mission Readiness

What GAO Found

The Transportation Security Administration's (TSA) Office of Training and Development (OTD) assesses air marshals' training needs using several information sources, but opportunities exist to obtain more feedback from air marshals on whether the training courses they must take met their needs. OTD primarily assesses air marshals' training needs by holding curriculum development and review conferences composed of OTD officials, training instructors, and other subject matter experts. In assessing courses, conference participants use, among other things, the results of surveys that some air marshals complete on the effectiveness of their training. However, while OTD administers these surveys for air marshal candidates and newly graduated air marshals, it does not use them to obtain feedback from incumbent air marshals on the effectiveness of their annual recurrent training courses. Systematically gathering feedback from incumbent air marshals would better position OTD to fully assess whether the training program is meeting air marshals' needs. Additionally, among the training surveys that OTD does currently administer to air marshals, the response rates have been low. For example, among newly hired air marshals and their supervisors from 2009 through 2011—the last three full years in which the Federal Air Marshal Service (FAMS) hired air marshals—the survey response rates ranged from 16 to 38 percent. Until OTD takes steps to achieve sufficient response rates, OTD cannot be reasonably assured that the feedback it receives represents the full spectrum of views held by air marshals.

FAMS relies on its annual recurrent training program to ensure incumbent air marshals' mission readiness, but additional actions could strengthen FAMS's ability to do so. First, FAMS does not have complete and timely data on the extent to which air marshals have completed their recurrent training. For example, nearly one-quarter of all training records for calendar year 2014 had not been entered into FAMS's training database within the required time period. Policies that specify who is responsible at the headquarters level for overseeing these activities could help FAMS ensure its data on air marshals' recurrent training are accurate and up to date. Second, FAMS requires air marshals to demonstrate proficiency in marksmanship by achieving a minimum score of 255 out of 300 on the practical pistol course every quarter. However, for the remaining recurrent training courses FAMS does not assess air marshals' knowledge or performance in these courses against a similarly identified level of proficiency, such as by requiring examinations or by using checklists or other objective tools. More objective and standardized methods of determining incumbent air marshals' mission readiness, as called for by the Department of Homeland Security's (DHS) Learning Evaluation Guide, could help FAMS better and more consistently assess air marshals' skills and target areas for improvement. Additionally, in 2015 FAMS developed a health, fitness, and wellness program to improve air marshals' overall health and wellness, but it is too early to gauge the program's effectiveness.

This is a public version of a sensitive report that GAO issued in June 2016. Information that TSA deems "Sensitive Security Information" has been removed.