AVIATION SECURITY

Challenges Exist in Stabilizing and Enhancing Passenger and Baggage Screening Operations

What GAO Found

TSA met its mandate to establish a federal screener workforce by November 2002, but continues to face challenges in hiring and deploying passenger and baggage screeners. Staffing shortages at some airports and TSA’s hiring process have hindered TSA’s ability to fully staff screening checkpoints without using additional measures, such as overtime. In addition, while TSA has taken steps to enhance its screener training programs, staffing shortages and lack of high-speed connectivity at airport training facilities have made it difficult for screeners at some airports to fully utilize these programs.

TSA has also undertaken several initiatives to measure the performance of passenger screeners in detecting threat objects. These efforts include increasing covert testing at screening checkpoints and conducting annual recertifications of screeners. While TSA is making progress in measuring the performance of passenger screeners, it has collected limited performance data related to its baggage screening operations. However, TSA has begun collecting additional performance data related to its baggage screening operations, and plans to increase these efforts in the future.

TSA also continues to face challenges in deploying and leveraging screening equipment and technologies. TSA deployed Explosive Detection Systems and Explosive Trace Detection equipment to all airports to screen checked baggage. However, TSA has been unable to fully utilize this equipment to screen 100 percent of checked baggage due to screener shortages, and equipment out of service for maintenance and/or repairs. When this equipment is not available, TSA continues to screen checked baggage using alternative means. TSA also has ongoing initiatives designed to increase the efficiency of screening checked baggage, including implementing in-line baggage screening systems and streamlining screening processes.

What GAO Recommends

In prior reports, GAO has made numerous recommendations designed to strengthen airport passenger and baggage screening. GAO also has several ongoing reviews related to the issues addressed in this testimony, and will issue separate reports related to these areas at later dates, with additional recommendations as appropriate.