

## Why GAO Did This Study

Regional airlines have experienced the last six fatal commercial airline accidents, and pilot performance has been cited as a potential contributory factor in four of these accidents, including the most recent in February 2009 which resulted in 50 fatalities. Public and media concerns about aviation safety escalated as a result about the level of safety across the entire airline industry, particularly about pilot education and training before they can be hired by regional airlines. The Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) is responsible for ensuring that pilots receive the necessary training and undergo the proper certification testing. Once hired, all U.S. commercial airlines are required to provide the advanced training for their pilots. However, to become a certified commercial pilot, which is currently the minimum requirement for being hired by an airline as a first officer; individuals must undergo several steps of pilot training and certification in accordance with FAA regulations.

This statement is based on GAO's November 2011 report on initial pilot training and focuses on (1) the various types of U.S. pilot training organizations, the regulatory training requirements for commercial airline pilots, and how they compare in preparing pilots candidates for commercial airlines, and (2) how and to what extent FAA carries out its oversight role of pilot training and certification of private and commercial pilots.

## AVIATION SAFETY

### FAA Has An Opportunity to Enhance Safety and Improve Oversight of Initial Pilot Training

#### What GAO Found

FAA's pilot training requirements for certification of commercial pilots are not aligned with airline operations or emphasize skills that airlines consider important for greater aviation safety.

- Requirements do not emphasize training in decision-making, although this skill is essential to the airline pilot profession. According to FAA and other stakeholders, the regulations regarding ground school and flight training, as well as the test standards for a commercial pilot certificate, generally emphasize the development of motor skills to master of maneuvers and individual tasks to determine competence, and not decision making.
- Requirements do not emphasize training in using modern technologies, such as flight simulation training devices. Modern aircraft used by regional airlines have evolved and the operational demands have increased on pilots in high-altitude and complex airline operations. Pilots in today's newer aircraft have to manage automation, advanced avionics and systems, information displays, and other new technologies.
- Requirements and testing do not emphasize situational awareness or understanding risk assessment, or provide a complete understanding of managing the automation of the aircraft.

Many of the key industry stakeholders GAO interviewed said the current training regulations for commercial pilots should be revised to incorporate additional training requirements that would improve the performance capabilities of the first officer applicants that seek employment at airlines. Some of the recommended types of training are provided to pilots when they are hired by airlines to ensure that the newly hired commercial pilots are competent in a range of training areas—some per FAA requirements. However, according to the Air Line Pilots Association, the lack of specific training requirements to be a commercial airline pilot results in a wide range of initial training experiences, not all of which are well suited for the commercial airline industry. To compensate, some regional airlines use various flight training devices to screen pilots during the hiring process to gauge their piloting skills. FAA has an opportunity to ensure that the knowledge and skills it requires of commercial pilots is still relevant.

FAA has an annual inspection program that includes the oversight of pilot schools, pilot examiners, and flight instructors, i.e., the gatekeepers for the initial pilot training process. However, GAO's analysis of FAA inspection data found that the agency does not have a comprehensive system in place to adequately measure its performance in meeting annual inspection requirements for pilot schools and pilot examiners, which could make it difficult to ensure regulatory compliance and that safety standards are being met. GAO's report included recommendations to improve FAA's oversight of pilot certification by developing a comprehensive system that may include modifying or improving existing data systems to: (1) measure its performance in meeting the agency's annual inspection requirements for pilot schools and pilot examiners and (2) better understand the scope of discretionary inspections for flight instructors. FAA generally agreed with the recommendations.