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 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 can enhance safety and improve oversight of initial pilot training 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.