

Highlights of [GAO-13-208](#), a report to the Chairman of the Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure, House of Representatives

Why GAO Did This Study

TSA maintains a federal workforce to screen passengers and baggage at the majority of the nation's commercial airports, but also oversees a workforce of private screeners at airports who participate in the SPP. The SPP allows commercial airports to use private screeners, provided that the level of screening matches or exceeds that of federal screeners. In recent years, TSA's SPP has evolved to incorporate changes in policy and federal law, prompting enhanced interest in measuring screener performance. GAO was asked to examine the (1) status of SPP applications and airport operators', aviation stakeholders', and TSA's reported advantages and disadvantages of participating in the SPP; (2) extent to which TSA has provided airports guidance to govern the SPP application process; and (3) extent to which TSA assesses and monitors the performance of private and federal screeners. GAO surveyed 28 airport operators that had applied to the SPP as of April 2012, and interviewed 5 airport operators who have not applied and 1 airport operator who applied to the SPP after GAO's survey. Although not generalizable, these interviews provided insights. GAO also analyzed screener performance data from fiscal years 2009-2011. This is a public version of a sensitive report that GAO issued in November 2012. Information that TSA deemed sensitive has been redacted.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that the TSA Administrator develop guidance for SPP applicants and a mechanism to monitor private versus federal screener performance. TSA concurred with the recommendations.

View [GAO-13-208](#). For more information, contact Steve Lord at (202) 512-4379 or lords@gao.gov.

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SCREENING PARTNERSHIP PROGRAM

TSA Should Issue More Guidance to Airports and Monitor Private versus Federal Screener Performance

What GAO Found

Since implementation of the Screening Partnership Program (SPP) in 2004, 29 airports have applied to the program, citing various advantages and relatively few disadvantages. Of the 25 approved, 16 are participating in the program, 6 are currently in the contractor procurement process, and the remainder withdrew from participation because their commercial airline services were discontinued. In 2011, the Transportation Security Administration (TSA) denied applications for 6 airports because, according to TSA officials, the airports did not demonstrate that participation in the program would "provide a clear and substantial advantage to TSA security operations." After enactment of the Federal Aviation Administration Modernization and Reform Act of 2012 (FAA Modernization Act) in February 2012, TSA revised its SPP application, removing the "clear and substantial advantage" question. Four of the 6 airports that had been denied in 2011 later reapplied and were approved. In GAO's survey and in interviews with airport operators (of SPP and non-SPP airports) and aviation stakeholders, improved customer service and increased staffing flexibilities were most commonly cited as advantages or potential advantages of the SPP. Individual Federal Security Directors we interviewed cited reduced involvement in human resource management as an advantage; however, TSA generally remains neutral regarding the SPP. Few disadvantages were cited; however, some airport operators cited satisfaction with federal screeners and concerns with potential disruption from the transition to private screening services.

TSA has developed some resources to assist SPP applicants; however, it has not provided guidance to assist airports applying to the program. Consistent with the FAA Modernization Act, TSA's revised SPP application requested that applicants provide information to assist TSA in determining if their participation in the SPP would compromise security or detrimentally affect the cost-efficiency or screening effectiveness of passengers and property at their airport. TSA also developed responses to frequently asked questions and has expressed a willingness to assist airports that need it. However, TSA has not issued guidance to assist airports with completing applications and information on how the agency will assess them. Three of five airport operators who applied using the current application stated that additional guidance is needed to better understand how to respond to the new application questions. Developing guidance could better position airports to evaluate whether they are good candidates for the SPP.

TSA recently improved its screener performance measures, but could benefit from monitoring private versus federal screener performance. In April 2012, TSA added measures to ensure that the set of measures it uses to assess screener performance at private and federal airports better addresses its airport screening strategic goals and mission. However, TSA does not monitor private screener performance separately from federal screener performance. Instead, TSA conducts efforts to monitor screener performance at individual SPP airports, but these efforts do not provide information on SPP performance as a whole or across years, which makes it difficult to identify program trends. A mechanism to consistently monitor SPP versus non-SPP performance would better position TSA to ensure that the level of screening services and protection provided at SPP airports continues to match or exceed the level provided at non-SPP airports, thereby ensuring that SPP airports are operating as intended.