GAO Highlights

Highlights of GAO-17-488, a report to congressional committees

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INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY

Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration Needs to Strengthen Its Strategic Planning and Oversight to Modernize Legacy Systems

Why GAO Did This Study

FMCSA, established within the Department of Transportation in January 2000, is charged with reducing crashes involving commercial motor carriers (i.e., large trucks and buses) and saving lives. IT systems and infrastructure serve as a key enabler for FMCSA to achieve its mission. The agency reported spending about $46 million for its IT investments in fiscal year 2016.

In December 2015, the Fixing America's Surface Transportation Act was enacted and required GAO to review the agency's IT, data collection, and management systems. GAO's objectives were to (1) assess the extent to which the agency has plans to modernize its existing systems, (2) assess the extent to which FMCSA has implemented an IT governance structure, and (3) determine the extent to which FMCSA has ensured selected IT systems are effective. To do so, GAO analyzed FMCSA's strategic plan and modernization plans; compared governance documentation to best practices; selected four investments based on operations and maintenance spending for fiscal year 2016, among other factors, and compared assessments for the investments against OMB criteria; and interviewed officials.

What GAO Recommends

GAO is making five recommendations to FMCSA to improve its IT strategic planning, oversight, and operational analyses. The Department of Transportation concurred with all of the recommendations.

View GAO-17-488. For more information, contact Carol C. Harris at (202) 512-4456 or harriscc@gao.gov.

What GAO Found

The Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration (FMCSA) initiated a modernization effort in 2011 and developed an information technology (IT) strategic plan that describes the technical strategy, vision, mission, direction, and goals and objectives to support the agency's mission; however, the plan lacks timelines to guide FMCSA's goals and strategies. In addition, the agency has not completed a modernization plan for its existing IT systems that includes scope, an implementation strategy, schedule, results-oriented goals, and measures, although it has recently awarded a contract to develop such a plan. The Acting Chief Information Officer (CIO) said that updating FMCSA's IT strategic plan had not been a priority for the agency. However, without a complete IT strategic plan, FMCSA will be less likely to move toward its ultimate goal of modernizing its aging legacy systems.

FMCSA has begun to address leading practices of IT governance, but its investment governance framework does not adequately establish an investment board, select and reselect investments, and provide investment oversight. Specifically, regarding the practice of establishing an IT investment review board, FMCSA has not yet clearly defined roles and responsibilities for key working groups and individuals, including the Office of the CIO. Regarding selecting and reselecting IT investments, FMCSA requires participation and collaboration during the select phases for all IT investments; however, it lacks procedures for selecting new investments and reselecting investments that are already operational for continued funding. According to the Acting CIO, the agency is currently drafting these procedures and intends to finalize them by the end of May 2017. Regarding the practice of IT investment oversight, the agency has policies and procedures to ensure that corrective actions and related efforts are executed and tracked, but they have not yet been fully implemented by the three boards. These weaknesses are due to the agency not adhering to its IT orders that establish its governance structure. As a result, FMCSA lacks adequate visibility into and oversight of IT investment decisions and activities, which could ultimately hinder its modernization efforts.

FMCSA had not fully ensured that the four systems GAO selected to review are effectively meeting the needs of the agency because none of the program offices completed operational analyses as required by the Office of Management and Budget (OMB). However, as part of its capital planning and investment control process, FMCSA assessed the four key factors of an operational analysis—costs, schedules, investment performance, and customer and business needs. One of the selected programs had partially implemented all four of these factors; two programs had partially implemented one factor, and one program had not addressed any of these factors. This was due to FMCSA not having guidance for conducting operational analyses for investments in operations and maintenance. Until FMCSA fully reviews its operational investments, the agency will lack assurance that these systems meet mission needs.