



COMMERCIAL AVIATION

Certain Nonhub Airports Face Significant Challenges in Securing and Maintaining Air Service

Report to Congressional Committees

December 2025

GAO-26-107751

United States Government Accountability Office

Accessible Version

GAO Highlights

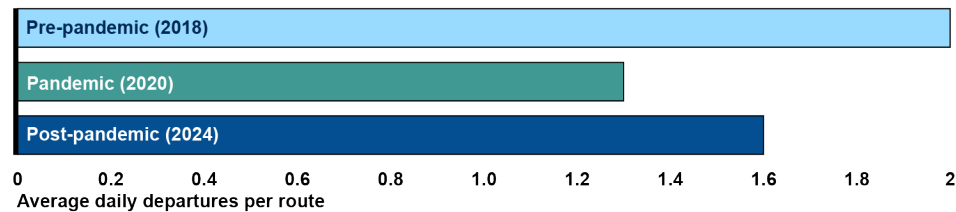
COMMERCIAL AVIATION Certain Nonhub Airports Face Significant Challenges in Securing and Maintaining Air Service

GAO-26-107751
December 2025
A report to congressional committees.
For more information, contact: Derrick Collins at CollinsD@gao.gov.

What GAO Found

According to key metrics, air service at airports of all sizes dropped sharply in 2020 with the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. While larger airports have rebounded to some extent, the recovery has lagged for smaller airports, including nonhub airports (i.e., airports that have less than 0.05 percent of annual U.S. commercial enplanements but have more than 10,000 annual enplanements). For example, the average number of daily departures per route for nonhub airports was 19 percent lower in 2024 than in 2018.

Average Daily Departures per Route for Nonhub Airports Before (2018), During (2020), and After (2024) the COVID-19 Pandemic (Calendar Years)



Source: GAO analysis of Department of Transportation (DOT) data. | GAO-26-107751

Note: Nonhub airports have less than 0.05 percent of annual U.S. commercial enplanements but have more than 10,000 annual enplanements.

The Department of Transportation (DOT) administers two federal programs that support air service to small communities. The Essential Air Service (EAS) program provides subsidies to airlines serving eligible communities to help support air service. The Small Community Air Service Development Program (SCASDP) provides grants to eligible communities not receiving EAS-subsidized service that can be used to jumpstart new air service. However, GAO found the demand for SCASDP grants has continued to exceed the support SCASDP offers. GAO also previously reported that SCASDP grants did not fully fund the revenue guarantees that reduce airlines’ financial risk to initiate new air service. Further, while SCASDP grants provide funding for revenue guarantees for up to 3 years, airport representatives and other stakeholders GAO interviewed identified ongoing funding as needed for maintaining service. The FAA Reauthorization Act of 2024 gave DOT some additional flexibilities to amend existing grants to small communities if circumstances change, and to consider grant applications for the same project from the community in a shorter time frame.

Certain nonhub airports that do not receive subsidized air service through EAS (non-EAS nonhub airports) have faced challenges securing and maintaining air service. For example, some of these airports reported an increased need to pay airlines for service, as airlines have shifted to using larger planes and scaled back service to some

smaller communities to reduce their operating costs. Representatives of selected non-EAS nonhub airports told GAO they have leveraged various sources of funding to provide airlines revenue guarantees to help secure new air service. However, representatives of several selected airports stressed the difficulty of providing ongoing funding to maintain air service, particularly once any funding from SCASDP has been exhausted.

Why GAO Did This Study

Access to air service provides a vital connection to the national transportation system and can be an important driver of economic growth. However, smaller communities have experienced declining scheduled passenger air service for several decades. The smaller airports impacted by air service declines include certain nonhub airports that have not regained pre-pandemic service levels.

The FAA Reauthorization Act of 2024 includes a provision in statute for GAO to study challenges that certain nonhub airports face. This report describes (1) changes in key metrics for air service at nonhub airports from 2018 through 2024; (2) the extent to which SCASDP can help non-EAS nonhub airports secure and maintain air service; and (3) challenges selected non-EAS nonhub airports have identified, and how these airports have addressed the challenges.

GAO analyzed flight data reported to DOT for key metrics, including average daily departures per route, from calendar year 2018 through calendar year 2024.

GAO interviewed DOT officials and reviewed relevant statutes and grant documentation, including grant applications and awards for SCASDP from fiscal year 2018 through fiscal year 2023 (the most recent award cycle).

Finally, GAO selected seven non-EAS nonhub airports based on factors such as changes in air service. GAO interviewed representatives of these airports about challenges they have faced and their efforts to address those challenges, and GAO conducted site visits to four of the airports. GAO also interviewed state aviation officials in four states where selected airports are located as well as aviation stakeholders.

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Abbreviations

AIP	Airport Improvement Program
ASEP	Air Service Enhancement Program
CPA	Capacity Purchase Agreement
DOT	Department of Transportation
EAS	Essential Air Service
FAA	Federal Aviation Administration
SCASDP	Small Community Air Service Development Program

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December 17, 2025

The Honorable Ted Cruz
Chairman
The Honorable Maria Cantwell
Ranking Member
Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation
United States Senate

The Honorable Sam Graves
Chairman
The Honorable Rick Larsen
Ranking Member
Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure
House of Representatives

Access to air service provides a vital connection to the national transportation system and can be an important driver of economic growth, especially for small communities.¹ According to the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA), aviation supports economic output and local economic development, attracts business and tourism, and helps retain jobs that might otherwise be located elsewhere.² The Airline Deregulation Act of 1978 phased out the government’s control over fares and service and allowed market forces to determine the price and level of domestic airline service in the United States.³ This change raised questions about whether some communities would lose service entirely as air carriers shifted their operations to larger, potentially more lucrative markets. In response, the act also established the Essential Air Service (EAS) program, to help eligible smaller communities retain a link to the national aviation system through subsidies. In 2000, the Small Community Air Service Development Program (SCASDP) was established to help eligible communities with insufficient air carrier service or unreasonably high fares improve their air service through discretionary grants.

However, we have found that scheduled passenger air service to smaller communities—including those served by nonhub primary airports (nonhub airports)—has declined for several decades.⁴ Moreover, we reported in 2024 that the COVID-19 pandemic significantly impacted air service to these communities, and that service at many smaller airports had not fully recovered by 2023.⁵ In our 2024 report, we described factors stakeholders identified as contributing to these trends, including a shortage in the pilot workforce, airline operating costs, and “passenger leakage,” that is, when residents who live close to a smaller airport choose to drive to their

¹For more information, see GAO, *Commercial Aviation: Trends in Air Service to Small Communities*, [GAO-24-106681](#) (Washington, D.C.: Sept. 25, 2024).

²FAA, *The Economic Impact of Civil Aviation on the U.S. Economy: 2020 State Supplement* (September 2023).

³Pub. L. No. 95-504, 92 Stat. 1705.

⁴Under statute, nonhub airports are defined as those that have less than 0.05 percent of annual U.S. commercial enplanements (i.e., passenger boardings) but have more than 10,000 annual enplanements.

⁵[GAO-24-106681](#).

destination or to a larger airport. The smaller airports impacted by declines in air service included certain nonhub airports that had not regained pre-pandemic service levels.

The FAA Reauthorization Act of 2024 includes a provision for us to conduct a study on the challenges faced by certain nonhub airports not designated as EAS communities, and to recommend ways to help secure and retain flight schedules using existing federal programs, such as SCASDP.⁶ This report describes (1) how scheduled passenger air service at nonhub airports changed from 2018 through 2024, according to key metrics; (2) the extent to which SCASDP can help nonhub airports not receiving EAS-subsidized service (non-EAS nonhub airports) secure and maintain scheduled passenger air service; and (3) challenges selected non-EAS nonhub airports identified in securing or maintaining air service, and how these airports have addressed the challenges.

To address the first objective, we analyzed changes in air service using key metrics from flight data that U.S. passenger airlines reported to the Department of Transportation (DOT) from calendar years 2018 through 2024. These were the most recent full-year data available at the time of our analysis. We identified two key metrics for air service at nonhub airports: average daily departures per route and connectivity index score, which is a measure of access to the national aviation system. We focused on nonhub airports, which are airports that have less than 0.05 percent of annual U.S. commercial enplanements (i.e., passenger boardings) but have more than 10,000 annual enplanements.⁷ To assess the reliability of the data, we reviewed the quality control procedures that DOT used.⁸ We determined the data were sufficiently reliable for the purpose of identifying changes in air service at nonhub airports.

To address the second objective, we reviewed options stakeholders identified in our prior work on securing and maintaining air service to small communities. We also interviewed DOT officials; aviation stakeholders we selected based on their knowledge of nonhub airports (i.e., the American Association of Airport Executives, the Airport Consultants Council, and the National Association of State Aviation Officials); and airport representatives at the selected nonhub airports described below. We reviewed grant applications and awards for SCASDP from fiscal years 2018 through 2023 (the most recent SCASDP award cycle).⁹

To address the third objective, we interviewed representatives from a nongeneralizable sample of seven non-EAS nonhub airports chosen based on service changes (e.g., dropped below three average daily departures per route or had increased service), previously identified challenges to securing and maintaining air service, diversity of geographic location, and stakeholder suggestions;¹⁰ state aviation officials in four states selected in conjunction with these airports; and the aviation stakeholders listed above.¹¹ We also conducted site visits to four of the nonhub airports we selected, and we reviewed interviews and analyses from our prior work on

⁶Pub. L. No. 118-63, § 774B, 138 Stat. 1025, 1299.

⁷We used FAA enplanement data for 2018 to identify nonhub airports.

⁸We downloaded the data from Cirium, a private data contractor housing various aviation data on its platform.

⁹DOT awarded grants for the fiscal year 2023 cycle in October 2024.

¹⁰We selected seven nonhub airports for this review. These airports are located in Dubuque, IA; Grand Junction, CO; Hilton Head Island, SC; Rock Springs, WY; Springfield, IL; Traverse City, MI; and Wenatchee, WA.

¹¹When referring to airport representatives or aviation stakeholders, we use the term “several” for three or more.

trends in air service to small communities.¹² See appendix I for more information about our scope and methodology.

We conducted this performance audit from August 2024 to December 2025 in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards. Those standards require that we plan and perform the audit to obtain sufficient, appropriate evidence to provide a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives. We believe that the evidence obtained provides a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives.

Background

Commercial Service Airports

The United States has roughly 3,300 airports that are designated by FAA as part of the national airport system. Of these, about 500 airports are “commercial service” airports that are publicly owned, have scheduled service, and board at least 2,500 passengers per year. Federal law divides commercial service airports into various categories based on the number of passenger boardings (i.e., enplanements), ranging from large hub airports to non-primary nonhub airports (see fig. 1).

Figure 1: Commercial Service Airport Categories for U.S. Airports Based on Calendar Year 2024 Passenger Boardings

Commercial airport category	Range of total annual passenger boardings	Annual passenger boardings		Number of airports
		Percentage	Number	
 Large hub	1% or more	 71.5%	702,968,069	31
 Medium hub	At least 0.25%, but less than 1%	 16.0%	157,375,350	32
 Small hub	At least 0.05%, but less than 0.25%	 9.4%	92,739,436	77
 Nonhub	More than 10,000, but less than 0.05%	 2.9%	28,929,456	254
 Non-primary nonhub	At least 2,500 and no more than 10,000	 0.1%	592,679	119

Source: GAO analysis of Federal Aviation Administration enplanement data. | GAO-26-107751

¹²[GAO-24-106681](#).

Accessible Data for Figure 1: Commercial Service Airport Categories for U.S. Airports Based on Calendar Year 2024 Passenger Boardings

Commercial airport category	Range of total annual passenger boardings	Annual passenger boardings per airport category: Percentage	Annual passenger boardings per airport category: Number	Number of airports
Large hub	1% or more	71.5%	702,968,069	31
Medium hub	At least 0.25%, but less than 1%	16.0%	157,375,350	32
Small hub	At least 0.05%, but less than 0.25%	9.4%	92,739,436	77
Nonhub	More than 10,000, but less than 0.05%	2.9%	28,929,456	254
Non-primary nonhub	At least 2,500 and no more than 10,000	0.1%	592,679	119

Source: GAO analysis of Federal Aviation Administration enplanement data. | GAO-26-107751

Airline Business Models

Scheduled passenger air service to communities of all sizes can differ—for example, by aircraft size and number of seats—depending on the business model of the airline providing service and on the regulatory framework under which the airline is operating. When operating under Part 121 rules, larger network airlines may connect smaller airport “spokes” to larger airports in their hub-and-spoke networks by contracting with regional airlines.¹³

- Under a capacity purchase agreement, network airlines contract with regional airlines to provide air service beyond the network airline’s route network to increase their capacity and revenue. Agreement terms vary but, as an example, a network airline can take on all commercial functions, such as brand marketing, flight scheduling, and ticket pricing, while the regional airline is responsible for the aircraft and crews to operate the flights and provide ground and flight operations. In this arrangement, the network airline pays the regional airline a fixed fee to provide service and as such, any profit beyond the fee—as well as any risk—goes to the network airline.
- By contrast, under a prorate agreement, the regional airline receives a percentage of the overall fare paid by the passengers for flights marketed by its partner network airline(s), shifting the risk to the regional airline, together with any resulting profit.

Airlines operating under low-cost and ultra-low-cost business models may provide point-to-point service to smaller airports, including service to leisure destinations.

¹³14 C.F.R. Part 121 sets forth operating requirements for domestic, flag, and supplemental operations, which are defined under 14 C.F.R. § 110.2. Scheduled service can also be provided by smaller airlines under 14 C.F.R. Part 135, which sets forth requirements for commuter and on-demand operations.

Federal Programs That Support Air Service to Small Communities

Two federal programs administered by DOT support air service to small communities.¹⁴

Essential Air Service. EAS was established in 1978 and provides federal subsidies to air carriers serving certain eligible small communities. According to DOT, in November 2025 EAS supported air service at 108 airports in eligible communities within the contiguous United States.¹⁵ EAS does so through annual appropriations from the Airport and Airway Trust Fund and overflight fees collected by FAA from foreign aircraft traveling over U.S. airspace.¹⁶ For fiscal year 2025, the program provided subsidies totaling approximately \$598 million to air carriers for service to these eligible communities.

Small Community Air Service Development Program. SCASDP was established in 2000 to, among other things, provide federal discretionary grants to fund strategies to improve air service and address airfare issues at eligible communities with insufficient air carrier service or unreasonably high airfares. (Communities that receive EAS-subsidized service are not eligible for SCASDP funds.) DOT is authorized to award up to 40 SCASDP grants per fiscal year to communities (not more than four per state) with underserved airports that seek to obtain airline service or to implement other measures to lower the cost and improve availability of air service. Pursuant to statute, eligible communities receive priority consideration for projects that align with certain criteria, such as

- having higher-than-average airfares;
- showing the air service will bring broad material benefits;
- restoring prior air service;
- demonstrating support from at least one air carrier to enlist new or expand air service;
- providing local funding; and
- committing to facilitate air carrier service through a public-private partnership.

For fiscal year 2023, the most recent award year, DOT awarded nearly \$12 million in SCASDP grants to 14 communities in 14 states in October 2024.¹⁷

SCASDP grantees may use their awards to implement measures to improve air service, such as for marketing or to fund minimum revenue guarantees (revenue guarantees) to attract airlines to begin new nonstop service. Revenue guarantees are designed to limit an airline's risk in initiating air service by guaranteeing that the

¹⁴DOT's Airport Improvement Program (AIP) also provides funding to airports, including those serving small communities. AIP generally focuses on capital and infrastructure projects and does not provide funding directly for air service.

¹⁵EAS also served 70 communities in Alaska and four communities in Hawaii (which have different eligibility requirements) and one community in Puerto Rico. These communities are not included in our review. For more information about EAS, see GAO, *Commercial Aviation: Effects of Changes to the Essential Air Service Program, and Stakeholders' Views on Benefits, Challenges, and Potential Reforms*, [GAO-20-74](#) (Washington, D.C.: Dec. 10, 2019).

¹⁶Overflight fees are considered mandatory spending (i.e., budget authority that is provided in laws other than appropriation acts).

¹⁷In fiscal year 2023, DOT received \$10 million in appropriations and awarded nearly \$12 million in grants. According to DOT officials, the amount of funds available in a given fiscal year has at times exceeded the appropriated amount for that year. For example, in certain years, funds recovered from prior grant awards became available and supplemented the appropriated funding.

airline will generate a specified amount of revenue from the ticket sales associated with new service over a specified time frame. When offering a revenue guarantee, the community agrees to pay the remainder to the airline if ticket sales do not meet the guaranteed minimum amount.

The FAA Reauthorization Act of 2024 included changes to SCASDP.¹⁸ For example, the act required DOT to prioritize, among other factors, communities or consortia of communities where the assistance will be used to help restore scheduled passenger air service that has been substantially reduced (in addition to restoration of lost prior service). The act also increased annual authorized funding for the program from \$10 million to \$15 million from 2024 through 2028.

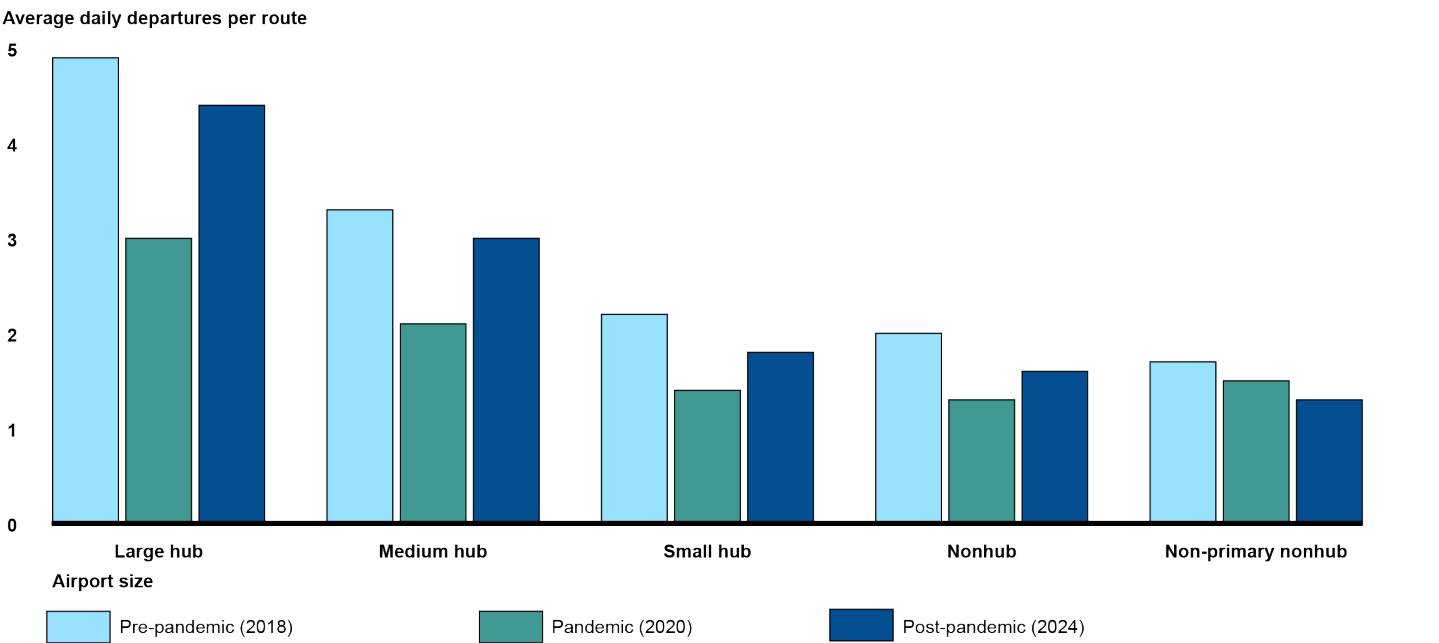
Key Metrics Show Air Service Dropped Precipitously During the Pandemic at Nonhub Airports on Average, and Post-Pandemic Recovery Varied

According to key metrics—specifically, average daily departures per route and connectivity index score—air service at airports of all sizes dropped precipitously in 2020 with the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, exacerbating air service trends that were already affecting many smaller airports. While larger airports have rebounded to some extent, the recovery has lagged for some smaller airports, including nonhub airports. The experiences of specific nonhub airports varied considerably when comparing 2018 with 2024, including for several of the nonhub airports we selected for our review. We also found that key metrics were generally worse for non-EAS nonhub airports from 2018 to 2024 than for nonhub airports that received EAS-subsidized service.

Average daily departures per route. The average number of daily departures per route at nonhub airports was 32 percent lower in 2020 than in 2018, a decrease from an average of 2.0 daily departures per route to 1.3. By 2024, the average number of daily departures per route for these airports had increased from 2020 but remained 19 percent below the 2018 level, a decrease from an average of 2.0 daily departures per route to 1.6. By contrast, while large hub airports also saw sharp declines in 2020, their average number of daily departures per route had recovered to a greater degree by 2024, although they remained 9 percent below the 2018 level (see fig. 2).

¹⁸Pub. L. No. 118-63, § 562, 138 Stat. 1025, 1217 (codified at 49 U.S.C. § 41743).

Figure 2: Average Daily Departures per Route by Airport Size Before (2018), During (2020), and After (2024) the COVID-19 Pandemic



Source: GAO analysis of Department of Transportation data. | GAO-26-107751

Accessible Data for Figure 2: Average Daily Departures per Route by Airport Size Before (2018), During (2020), and After (2024) the COVID-19 Pandemic

Airport size	Pre-pandemic (2018)	Pandemic (2020)	Post-pandemic (2024)
Large hub	4.9	3	4.4
Medium hub	3.3	2.1	3
Small hub	2.2	1.4	1.8
Nonhub	2	1.3	1.6
Non-primary nonhub	1.7	1.5	1.3

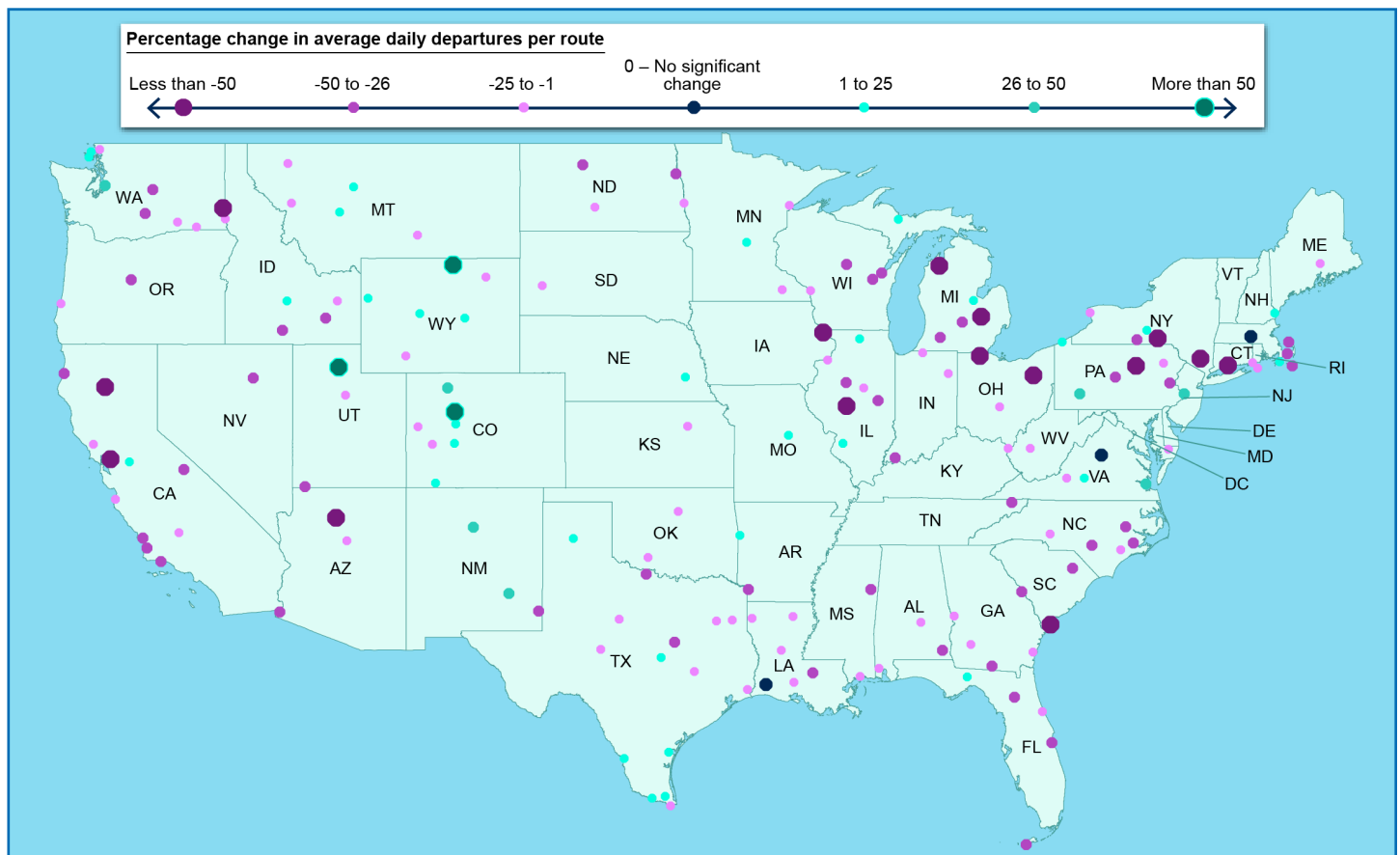
Source: GAO analysis of Department of Transportation data. | GAO-26-107751

Note: We conducted our analysis for calendar years. Under statute, U.S. commercial airports are categorized by the number of annual enplanements (i.e., passenger boardings) they have. Large hub airports have 1 percent or more of annual enplanements. Medium hub airports have at least 0.25 percent but less than 1.0 percent of annual enplanements. Small hub airports have at least 0.05 percent but less than 0.25 percent of annual enplanements. Nonhub primary airports have less than 0.05 percent of annual enplanements but have more than 10,000 annual enplanements. And non-primary nonhub airports are those airports that have scheduled passenger service and have at least 2,500 but no more than 10,000 annual enplanements. We used Federal Aviation Administration enplanement data for 2018 to determine airport size.

From 2018 to 2024, non-EAS nonhub airports generally experienced a greater decrease in average daily departures per route than nonhub airports in the EAS program. Non-EAS nonhub airports lost 34 percent of their average daily departures per route from 2018 to 2020 and, by 2024, average daily departures per route at these airports remained 21 percent below 2018 levels (dropping from about 2.1 to 1.6). By contrast, by 2024, nonhub airports receiving EAS-subsidized service had nearly recovered from the 13-percent drop in average daily departures per route they had experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic, with a decrease of 5 percent

from 2018 to 2024 (dropping from about 1.4 to 1.3).¹⁹ Over 70 percent (123 of 170) of non-EAS nonhub airports experienced a decline in average daily departures per route (see fig. 3).

Figure 3: Percentage Change from 2018 to 2024 in Average Daily Departures per Route for Nonhub Airports Not Receiving EAS-Subsidized Service



Source: GAO analysis of Department of Transportation data. Base map from MapInfo. | GAO-26-107751

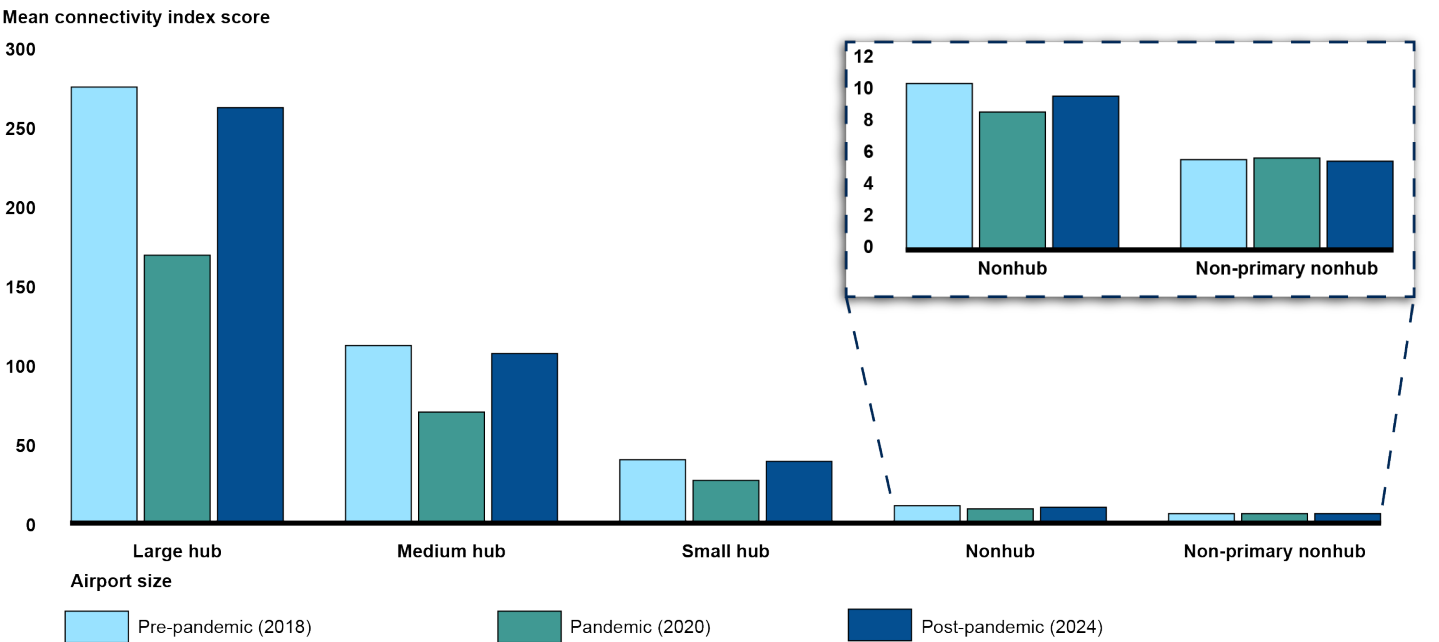
Note: Our analysis includes average daily departures per route for nonhub primary airports not receiving subsidized service under the Essential Air Service (EAS) program. We conducted our analysis for calendar years. Nonhub primary airports have less than 0.05 percent of annual U.S. commercial enplanements but have more than 10,000 annual enplanements. We used Federal Aviation Administration enplanement data for 2018 to determine airport size.

The seven non-EAS nonhub airports we selected for our review experienced a reduction in average daily departures per route from 2018 to 2024. However, as with non-EAS nonhub airports nationally, their experiences varied. Average daily departures per route dropped over 50 percent at four of the selected airports, including the airport in Dubuque, Iowa, which had the largest reduction, dropping 94 percent (from about 2.6 to 0.1). By contrast, average daily departures per route at the airport serving Grand Junction, Colorado—which is close to several national parks—decreased only 6 percent (from about 2.1 to 2). For more information about each of the selected airports, see appendix II.

¹⁹These averages do not include non-primary nonhub airports receiving EAS-subsidized service.

Connectivity index score. Similarly, the mean connectivity index score—a measure of a passenger’s degree of access to the aviation system—was 17 percent lower for nonhub airports in 2020 than in 2018, falling from 10.5 to 8.7 (see fig. 4). The connectivity index score is a function of the frequency of available scheduled flights, the quantity and quality of nonstop destinations serviced, and the quantity and quality of connecting destinations.²⁰ The mean connectivity index score of nonhub airports increased from 2020 to 2024 but remained 8 percent lower than in 2018, falling from 10.5 to 9.7 over that time. As with average daily departures per route, the mean connectivity index score for large hub airports had recovered to a greater degree by 2024, although it remained 5 percent below the 2018 level.

Figure 4: Mean Connectivity Index Score by Airport Size Before (2018), During (2020), and After (2024) the COVID-19 Pandemic



Source: GAO analysis of Department of Transportation data. | GAO-26-107751

Accessible Data for Figure 4: Mean Connectivity Index Score by Airport Size Before (2018), During (2020), and After (2024) the COVID-19 Pandemic

Airport size	Pre-pandemic (2018)	Pandemic (2020)	Post-pandemic (2024)
Large hub	275	169	262
Medium hub	112	70	107
Small hub	40	27	39
Nonhub	10.5	8.7	9.7
Non-primary nonhub	5.7	5.8	5.6

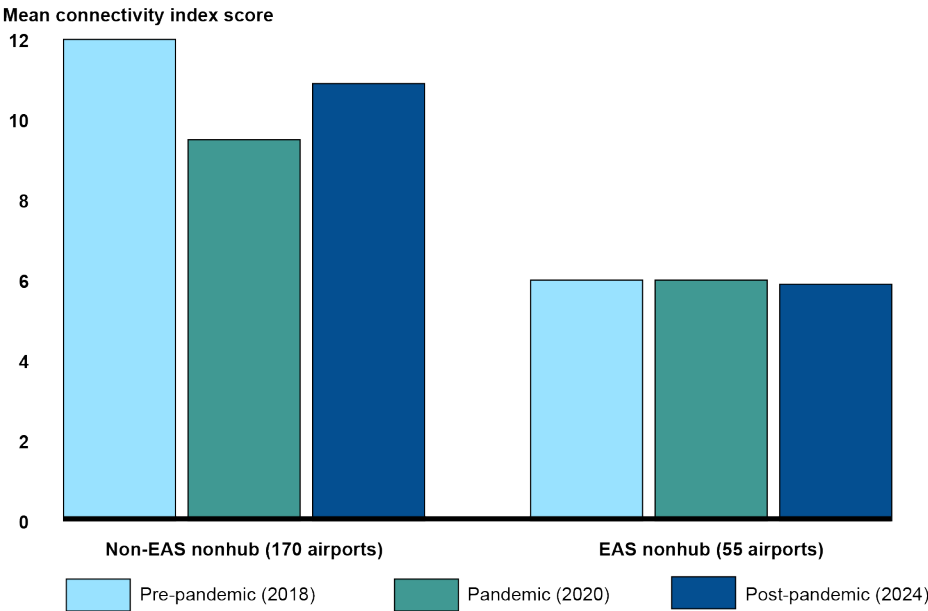
Source: GAO analysis of Department of Transportation data. | GAO-26-107751

²⁰We analyzed the connectivity index introduced by Wittman and Swelbar. Michael Wittman and William Swelbar, “Modeling Changes in Connectivity at U.S. Airports: A Small Community Perspective,” Report No. ICAT-2013-05 (June 2013). For more information, see appendix I.

Note: We conducted our analysis for calendar years. Under statute, U.S. commercial airports are categorized by the number of annual enplanements (i.e., passenger boardings) they have. Large hub airports have 1 percent or more of annual enplanements. Medium hub airports have at least 0.25 percent but less than 1.0 percent of annual enplanements. Small hub airports have at least 0.05 percent but less than 0.25 percent of annual enplanements. Nonhub primary airports have less than 0.05 percent of annual enplanements but have more than 10,000 annual enplanements. And non-primary nonhub airports are those airports that have scheduled passenger service and have at least 2,500 but no more than 10,000 annual enplanements. We used Federal Aviation Administration enplanement data for 2018 to determine airport size.

From 2018 to 2024, non-EAS nonhub airports experienced greater declines in connectivity than nonhub airports receiving EAS-subsidized service during the pandemic.²¹ During this period, the mean connectivity index score of non-EAS nonhub airports declined 8.9 percent (from about 12 to 10.9), while the mean connectivity index score of nonhub airports receiving EAS-subsidized service declined 2.6 percent (from about 6 to 5.9) (see fig. 5).

Figure 5: Mean Connectivity Index Score Before (2018), During (2020), and After (2024) the COVID-19 Pandemic for Nonhub Airports Receiving and Not Receiving Essential Air Service (EAS)



Source: GAO analysis of Department of Transportation data. | GAO-26-107751

Accessible Data for Figure 5: Mean Connectivity Index Score Before (2018), During (2020), and After (2024) the COVID-19 Pandemic for Nonhub Airports Receiving and Not Receiving Essential Air Service (EAS)

Airport	Pre-pandemic (2018)	Pandemic (2020)	Recovery (2024)
Non-EAS nonhub (170 airports)	12	9.5	10.9
EAS nonhub (55 airports)	6	6	5.9

Source: GAO analysis of Department of Transportation data. | GAO-26-107751

Note: The EAS program provides federal subsidies to air carriers to serve certain eligible communities. We defined an EAS nonhub airport as a nonhub airport that received EAS-subsidized service for at least 1 year from 2018 through 2024. We conducted our analysis for calendar years. Nonhub primary

²¹As discussed in our prior report on air service to small communities, 49 U.S.C. § 41732(b) establishes minimum service requirements for EAS-eligible communities, and DOT’s EAS orders also specify the number of flights air carriers providing EAS must provide. During the COVID-19 pandemic, DOT notices addressed these requirements to help protect EAS communities from losing air service. See [GAO-24-106681](#).

airports have less than 0.05 percent of annual U.S. commercial enplanements but have more than 10,000 annual enplanements. We used Federal Aviation Administration enplanement data for 2018 to determine airport size.

Of the seven non-EAS nonhub airports we selected for our review, three experienced a relatively large decline in their connectivity index scores when compared to the mean for nonhub airports: Dubuque, Iowa, which dropped 36 percent; Springfield, Illinois, which dropped 24 percent; and Wenatchee, Washington, which dropped 16 percent. The connectivity index scores of three other selected airports—in Grand Junction, Colorado; Rock Springs, Wyoming; and Traverse City, Michigan—changed to a lesser extent during this period.²² Finally, the connectivity index score of the airport in Hilton Head Island, South Carolina, increased by 31 percent from 2018 to 2024. Despite a decline in average daily departures per route, discussed above, the number of nonstop destinations served from Hilton Head Island increased from one in 2018 to five in 2024. Thus, the airport was connected to more nonstop destinations, despite having fewer average daily departures per route, resulting in an increase in the airport's connectivity. According to an airport representative, Hilton Head Island became a haven for people looking to travel during the COVID-19 pandemic, which may have contributed to this trend.

SCASDP Can Offer Financial Support to Secure New Air Service at Certain Nonhub Airports but Limited Funding Assistance to Maintain It

For communities not in the EAS program, SCASDP can provide individual grants to jumpstart new air service at eligible communities with insufficient air carrier service or unreasonably high fares, including funding for minimum revenue guarantees.²³ However, we found the demand for grant assistance has continued to exceed the support SCASDP offers and, as we previously reported, SCASDP grants have become insufficient to fund the larger revenue guarantees needed to secure service. SCASDP offers flexibilities to adjust grants in response to changing conditions, which the FAA Reauthorization Act of 2024 expanded by giving DOT the authority to amend the scope of a grant agreement if the amendment is reasonably consistent with the community's current air service need.²⁴ SCASDP also provides limited flexibility to communities to maintain air service by allowing DOT to award more than one grant for the same project after 5 years.²⁵ However, once a grant has ended, communities can no longer use this federal funding to maintain service and must find other means of support for air service.

²²While not in the EAS program, Rock Springs participates in a state program that has a capacity purchase agreement with SkyWest Airlines to serve some airports in the state. For more information about Wyoming DOT's support for air service in the state, see appendix III.

²³Communities that receive EAS-subsidized service are not eligible for SCASDP funds. As of 2024, half of the 108 small communities receiving EAS-subsidized service have nonhub airports.

²⁴FAA Reauthorization Act of 2024, Pub. L. No. 118-63, § 562 (2024). Pursuant to § 41743(e), DOT may amend the scope of a grant agreement at the request of the community or consortium and any participating air carrier, and may limit the scope of a grant agreement to only the elements using grant assistance or to only the elements achieved, if DOT determines that the amendment is reasonably consistent with the original purpose of the project or the community's current air service needs.

²⁵Under 49 U.S.C. § 41743(c)(4)(C), DOT may waive the 5-year limitation on same projects if it determines the community "spent little or no money on its previous project or encountered industry or environmental challenges, due to circumstances that were reasonably beyond the control of the community."

Demand for SCASDP Grants Continued to Exceed Available Funding

Our analysis of SCASDP applications found more demand than assistance available in fiscal years 2018 through 2023 (see table 1). For the most recent grant opportunity, for example, 40 communities applied for more than \$30 million to support air service at their local airports for fiscal year 2023, and DOT awarded SCASDP grants totaling nearly \$12 million to 14 communities.²⁶ According to DOT officials, funding appropriated for SCASDP has dropped since fiscal year 2002 (in nominal dollars) and has not kept pace with airport needs.²⁷ Further, while the FAA Reauthorization Act of 2024 increased the authorized amount for the program to \$15 million annually for fiscal years 2024 through 2028, appropriations for the program for fiscal year 2025 were \$10 million pursuant to a continuing resolution.²⁸

Table 1: Small Community Air Service Development Program (SCASDP) Grant Applications and Awards, Fiscal Years 2018–2023

Award cycle (fiscal year)	Number of eligible communities (of total applications)	Total amount requested ^a	Number of awards	Total amount granted
2018	54 (of 57)	> \$37 million	18	\$12,242,000
2019	71 (of 78)	> \$58 million	22	\$17,972,111
2020	NA	NA	No grants awarded ^b	NA
2021	45 (of 48)	> \$33 million	25	\$16,931,000
2022	45 (of 48)	> \$34 million	20	\$14,815,000
2023	40 (of 46)	> \$31 million ^c	14	\$11,955,000

Source: GAO analysis of Department of Transportation data. | GAO-26-107751

^aIn its SCASDP award announcements, the Department of Transportation (DOT) provides the minimum amount requested.

^bDOT did not award SCASDP grants for fiscal year 2020 due to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on air service. According to agency officials, DOT instead combined no-year funds provided by Congress in fiscal year 2020 for grant awards in fiscal year 2021.

^cFiscal year 2023 total amount requested is based on eligible communities; requests for other years are based on applicant communities.

Moreover, we previously reported that higher airline operating costs have affected SCASDP by limiting the effectiveness of grants that communities use for revenue guarantees.²⁹ Specifically, airport representatives told us at that time that SCASDP grants had become insufficient to fund the larger revenue guarantees that airlines

²⁶None of our selected non-EAS nonhub airports received SCASDP grants in fiscal year 2023. The fiscal year 2022 grant awards included \$1.5 million to Dubuque for a revenue guarantee to initiate and support new service to a large or medium hub; \$250,000 to Springfield for a marketing campaign to support existing service on Allegiant Air and American Airlines; and \$750,000 to Traverse City for a revenue guarantee and marketing campaign to initiate and support new service to Houston.

²⁷From 2002 to 2017, appropriated funding for SCASDP varied (in nominal dollars) from \$20 million for fiscal year 2002, to \$5 million for fiscal year 2016, to \$10 million for fiscal year 2017. For more information, see GAO, *Small Community Air Service Development: Process for Awarding Grants Could Be Improved*, [GAO-19-172](#) (Washington, D.C.: Mar. 26, 2019). The amount of funds available in a given fiscal year has at times exceeded the appropriated amount for that year, according to DOT officials.

²⁸FAA Reauthorization Act of 2024, Pub. L. No. 118-63, § 562(3)(B), 138 Stat. 1025, 1217 (codified at 49 U.S.C. § 41743(e)(2)); Full-Year Continuing Appropriations and Extensions Act, 2025, Pub. L. No. 119-4, div. A, tit. I, § 1101(a)(12), 139 Stat. 9, 12. Funding for the program for fiscal year 2026 is also provided pursuant to a continuing resolution. Continuing Appropriations, Agriculture, Legislative Branch, Military Construction and Veterans Affairs, and Extensions Act, 2026, Pub. L. No. 119-37, div. A.

²⁹[GAO-24-106681](#).

seek to initiate air service. According to DOT officials, airlines' expectations for revenue guarantees had grown from \$500,000 to \$800,000 before the COVID-19 pandemic, to \$1.5 to \$2 million in early 2024.

Our prior work on small community air service included a range of options that aviation stakeholders identified for modifying SCASDP. These options included *increasing funding*, to better enable communities to attract sustained air service with higher revenue guarantees, and *concentrating funding*, to fund fewer grants at a higher level.³⁰

SCASDP Has Some Flexibilities to Adjust Grants in Response to Changing Conditions

According to DOT officials, SCASDP offers some flexibilities that DOT may use to amend grants in response to changing conditions, including modifications in response to circumstances beyond a community's control. With the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent decrease in air service, for example, the airport in Grand Junction was unable to secure the service to San Francisco it had planned for a fiscal year 2018 SCASDP grant. Working with DOT (and based on changes to SCASDP in the FAA Reauthorization Act of 2024), Grand Junction repurposed the grant, applying it in 2024 to a revenue guarantee restoring air service to Salt Lake City with SkyWest Airlines. This service had ended in 2021 after being offered for the previous 30 years.³¹

Before the flexibilities provided under the FAA Reauthorization Act of 2024, DOT was more limited in its ability to amend existing grants as communities' circumstances changed. For example, for fiscal year 2017, the community of Wenatchee received a \$750,000 SCASDP grant (matched with \$400,000 in local funds) to secure a flight between Wenatchee and San Francisco. With the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, the airport was unable to find an airline to provide this service after the airline included in the application stepped away. Representatives from the airport and regional port authority told us that when a different airline subsequently expressed interest in providing air service to Denver instead, the community was unable to change the purpose of the existing grant for this new route. According to DOT officials, prior to the passage of the FAA Reauthorization Act of 2024, DOT was limited in its ability to amend the scope of a grant agreement in accordance with a community's current needs due to a lack of statutory flexibility. In July 2025, DOT officials stated that, because the grant was still active, Wenatchee could reapply to DOT for a scope modification under the new flexibilities included in the FAA Reauthorization Act of 2024.

DOT officials told us they have flexibility to alter the scope of SCASDP grants from one location to another (e.g., changing destination airports), but the decision to do so may depend on the level of funding remaining in the grant and the likelihood of success given that level of funding. For example, if an airport wished to apply unexpended SCASDP funding to a new service (potentially with a different airline to a different location), but there was insufficient funding remaining in the grant to support a new revenue guarantee, then DOT might not approve the modification. In such a case, according to DOT officials, existing grantees have the option to apply for a new grant and need only terminate the existing grant if they are selected. This flexibility allows grantees to reapply without penalty and keep their existing grant in the event they are not selected.

³⁰For more information about these and other options for modifying SCASDP, see [GAO-24-106681](#).

³¹DOT officials also told us about a change they approved during the COVID-19 pandemic for Charleston, WV, where the original fiscal year 2021 SCASDP grant to support service by American Airlines to Texas (DFW or IAH) was changed to support Breeze Airline service to Las Vegas. DOT officials stated that the support was adjusted to address pandemic-related industry shifts. The new service began in May 2023.

SCASDP Provides Limited Flexibility and Funding Assistance to Communities to Maintain Air Service, but Recent Changes May Offer Additional Options

After a SCASDP grant has ended, communities must find other means to support air service. Representatives for six of the seven selected non-EAS nonhub airports we spoke with said they needed ongoing funding for revenue guarantees after they secured initial air service. SCASDP grants can provide funding for revenue guarantees for no more than 3 years. However, communities may need to expend the funding before that time, depending on how successful the new air service is. Representatives for two of the three stakeholders we spoke with also pointed to the need for continued support for smaller airports. For example, a representative for the National Association of State Aviation Officials told us that it is challenging for communities to expect self-sustaining service after a SCASDP grant, and that communities may need to secure additional funding to keep existing service.

While funding for revenue guarantees is time-limited by the SCASDP statute, the FAA Reauthorization Act of 2024 amended the law to allow DOT to award more than one grant for the same project after 5 years.³² This eligibility allows communities to apply for a new grant for the same project after 5 years, offering them the possibility of continuing to use SCASDP funding to pay revenue guarantees. However, the new application is subject to the competitive grant process, and DOT officials noted that a second grant is not assured, particularly when there are more applications than available funding.

Selected Nonhub Airports Reported Struggling to Address Challenges and Taking Some Steps to Secure or Maintain Air Service

Nonhub Airports Have Faced Challenges, Including Those Posed by Airline Industry Trends

Certain nonhub airports have faced challenges in securing and maintaining air service, particularly the daily network service that is a priority for travelers in smaller communities and that helps prevent businesses from relocating to areas with better service, according to the airport representatives and stakeholders we spoke with. Some of these challenges relate to airline industry trends, including airlines' shift to using larger aircraft and reducing flight frequencies in smaller markets to lower costs. Non-EAS nonhub airports have also faced a heightened need to pay revenue guarantees to incentivize airlines to establish new service or maintain existing service, according to these stakeholders. In addition, certain nonhub airports continue to experience passenger leakage, when travelers choose to drive to other airports for better service. Moreover, some non-EAS nonhub airports have operated at a competitive disadvantage in relation to airports that receive EAS-subsidized service, according to several airport representatives and stakeholders we spoke with.

³²The 2024 FAA Reauthorization amended 49 U.S.C. § 41743(d)(1) to state that the time limitation "shall begin with each new grant, including same-project new grants, and which shall be calculated on a non-consecutive basis for air carriers that provided air service that is seasonal." Pub. L. No. 118-63, § 562, 138 Stat. at 1217.

Shifts to Larger Aircraft and Fewer Flights Have Resulted in Reduced Air Service in Smaller Markets

As we have previously reported, in response to higher operating costs, including for labor, fuel, and fleet maintenance, airlines have sought to lower costs by replacing smaller planes across their fleets with larger aircraft (i.e., upgauging) and reducing flight frequencies at smaller airports, including nonhub airports.³³ As a result, small communities that were once served by turboprop aircraft that seated from nine to 30 passengers per flight, or by 50-seat aircraft, are now served by larger aircraft, including regional jets with 65 to 76 seats. Amid this upgauging, some smaller airports have seen their air service substantially reduced, with fewer flights per day on larger aircraft, or have lost service entirely.

Several of the representatives we spoke with from non-EAS nonhub airports described how their level of service changed as airlines began upgauging. Representatives from Pangborn Memorial Airport (EAT) in Wenatchee told us, for example, that before the COVID-19 pandemic, the airport had up to seven flights per day on smaller 30-seat aircraft, but flight frequency has decreased as airlines removed those aircraft from service. Similarly, representatives from Abraham Lincoln Capital Airport (SPI) in Springfield stated that the use of smaller, turboprop aircraft had provided more flexibility, servicing up to five flights per day before being phased out and replaced with larger regional jets with fewer flights.

Moreover, smaller communities typically have fewer passengers, and the larger aircraft currently in network fleets can be too big to be profitable in these markets, according to an industry analyst.³⁴ As a result, airlines may need to scale back service. At three of the non-EAS nonhub airports we selected for our review, new service that an airline provided on larger aircraft had not been successful or had to be scaled back. For example, in Springfield, Breeze Airways provided service via A220 aircraft (which typically seat 137 passengers) to two destinations in Florida beginning in December 2023. Eventually, the airline scaled back to one route in August 2024, as the service did not generate the expected traffic and revenues, according to airport representatives.

While not yet in commercial service, alternative types of aircraft, such as electric or hybrid-electric aircraft, offer the potential to provide service to small communities, according to representatives at each of the non-EAS nonhub airports we selected for our review. As we have previously reported, regional air mobility—an application of advanced air mobility—could use electric or hybrid-electric aircraft to carry passengers to adjoining regions and cities, and it could open up new regional corridors (see fig. 6).³⁵ Stakeholders also told us that electric or hybrid-electric aircraft—which include short-range aircraft in development that would

³³According to our prior work, other factors that have contributed to the decrease in air service to small airports include declining population levels in surrounding communities and a reduction in the number of small regional jets in airline fleets. In addition, a pilot shortage affected air service to small communities after the COVID-19 pandemic in 2021, when larger airlines filled their pilot vacancies by hiring pilots from regional airlines. However, several airport representatives and stakeholders we spoke with for this review said the shortage has largely abated, as airlines have shifted to using larger aircraft and reduced flight frequencies. For more information, see [GAO-24-106681](#). In addition, we have ongoing work on the regional airline pilot supply.

³⁴For more information on long-term trends in service to small airports, see William Swelbar, *The Economics That Have Shaped the Evolution of Connecting Smaller Markets to the U.S. Air Transportation System: From Turboprops to Small Regional Jets to Large Regional Jets* (Swelbar-Zhong Consultancy, January 2025).

³⁵The FAA Reauthorization Act of 2024 defines advanced air mobility as a transportation system that comprises urban air mobility and regional mobility. Both of these mobilities involve the use of advanced technologies such as fully electric and hybrid-electric aircraft for passenger transport, cargo transport, and emergency services, inside and outside of cities. According to DOT officials, fully electric aircraft have utility over shorter distances, such as trips up to 40 miles, and hybrid-electric aircraft can fly up to 300 miles before charging. For more information, see [GAO-24-106681](#).

accommodate nine, 30, or 100 passengers—may be more suitable for some smaller communities than the larger jets that airlines currently use. However, as of December 2025, these electric and hybrid-electric aircraft had not been certified by FAA, and questions remain about how they would be integrated into the national airspace system.

Figure 6: Examples of Hybrid-Electric Aircraft That Could Potentially Provide Air Service to Small Communities



Source: GAO analysis and photos from Heart Aerospace (left) and Electra.aero (right). | GAO-26-107751

Note: Pictured are the ES-30™ by Heart Aerospace and the EL9 Ultra Short by Electra.aero. For more information about electric or hybrid-electric aircraft, see GAO, *Advanced Air Mobility: Legal Authorities and Issues to Consider for Operations*, [GAO-24-106451](#) (Washington, D.C.: Mar. 14, 2024).

Nonhub Airports Have Faced a Heightened Need to Pay Revenue Guarantees to Airlines to Secure and Maintain Air Service

As airlines seek to increase revenue and reduce costs, many non-EAS nonhub airports now find themselves in a “pay-to-play” environment to have air service, according to several airport representatives and stakeholders we spoke to. As airlines make economic decisions on where to allocate their limited aircraft, communities find themselves having to pay revenue guarantees to launch new air service. As one airport representative told us, airlines are not interested in taking on risks (i.e., lower ticket sales than expected) to start new service in small markets without revenue guarantees.

Furthermore, small communities may also now need to pay to maintain air service at some smaller airports beyond the initial revenue guarantees they provided to launch new service. Representatives from two of the selected non-EAS nonhub airports we interviewed said they had lost service—or expected to do so—once the funds for revenue guarantees were fully expended. For example, representatives from Dubuque Regional Airport said that without another revenue guarantee, Dubuque may lose companies to locations with more frequent air service, as business travelers make up 60 to 70 percent of the current demand for service.

Communities can use revenue guarantees to secure scheduled passenger service with network airlines or their regional partners to hub airports, or with low-cost or ultra-low-cost carriers to leisure destinations. Several stakeholders and airport representatives stressed the importance of securing scheduled passenger service on network air carriers, which provide flights to larger hubs. For example, airport and community representatives in Dubuque, Springfield, and Wenatchee, among others, said that providing network service for travelers, particularly those traveling for business, was critical to their local economies. We have also reported that

access to adequate air service, and the connection this service provides to the rest of the country, is vital to companies located in or near small communities.³⁶

Leisure service (e.g., service once or twice per week to Las Vegas or Florida), by contrast, may offer fewer benefits to local communities, according to one state DOT official, because it is not designed to provide connections to the national aviation system. Despite this, representatives from one airport and from the Airport Consultants Council viewed jumpstarting leisure service with revenue guarantees as a way to demonstrate existing demand to eventually attract network service. However, a representative from another state DOT said that the advantages or disadvantages of using revenue guarantees to pursue leisure travel with the goal of attracting network service in their state were still to be determined.

Travelers May Choose to Drive to Other Airports for Better Service

As airlines consolidate their schedules with larger aircraft and fewer flights, travelers may choose to drive to other nearby airports for better service for several reasons. Residents of small communities are often willing to drive or take a bus to a larger airport to take advantage of the fares offered by low-cost or ultra-low-cost carriers and for nonstop service, according to representatives of an airline industry association and to a 2019 study.³⁷

Moreover, representatives at four of the selected non-EAS nonhub airports, three stakeholders, and one state DOT official we interviewed told us that travel can be less reliable when airports offer few daily flights, which can result in leakage as travelers choose to drive. For example, representatives from the airport in Wenatchee told us that their two daily departures to Seattle do not provide a sufficient safety net if a flight is canceled or delayed, or if the traveler misses a scheduled flight, creating an incentive for travelers to drive to another airport—typically 160 miles across two mountain passes to Seattle—or to their final destination.

Representatives at five of the selected non-EAS nonhub airports we interviewed also stressed the challenges posed by poor scheduling. They said that when available flights are not well timed for ongoing travel, such as flights departing very early or very late in the day, it can be difficult to align with connecting flights. According to community representatives in Springfield, for example, the two afternoon flights offered by American Airlines to Chicago were not well timed to transfer to connecting flights to popular destinations.

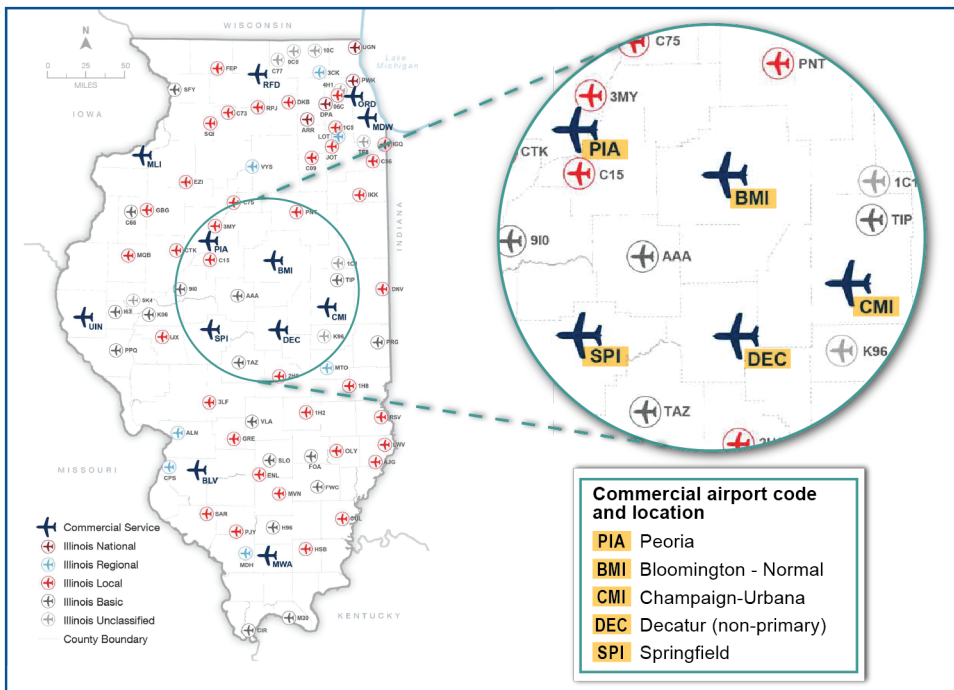
If travelers choose to drive, the leakage that results—with fewer passengers using local airports—has posed additional challenges to nonhub airports seeking to demonstrate demand for air service or to maintain existing air service, particularly if they are in competition with nearby airports. For example, representatives from the airport in Springfield said that declining ticket sales resulting from passenger leakage to nearby airports could lead American Airlines to decide to exit the market. Springfield sits among a cluster of smaller airports and is within a 2-hour drive of the medium hub airport in St. Louis, Missouri (see fig. 7). Airport representatives told us that a leakage study prepared for the airport found that over 90 percent of travelers in the catchment (i.e., the geographic area from which an airport can reasonably expect to draw commercial air service passengers) for

³⁶GAO-24-106681.

³⁷Stephanie Atallah and Susan L. Hotle, "Assessment of Contributing Factors to Air Service Loss in Small Communities," *Transportation Research Record*, vol. 2673 (2019).

Springfield traveled to other airports in 2023, including over 60 percent who drove to St. Louis. At that time, Abraham Lincoln Capital Airport (SPI) had less than one average daily departure per route.³⁸

Figure 7: Airports in Proximity to Abraham Lincoln Capital Airport (SPI) in Springfield, Illinois



Source: GAO presentation and Illinois Department of Transportation (map). | GAO-26-107751

Note: The Illinois Department of Transportation's *Illinois Public Airport Location Map* illustrated the locations for primary, reliever, and general aviation airports for the *Illinois Aviation System Plan* (2022).

The ability of travelers to drive to other airports to access the national airspace system is made possible by highway infrastructure throughout the United States, according to one industry analysis.³⁹ Accordingly, the analysis emphasized that the highway has been and remains the first mode that millions of travelers use to access air service. As small airports face challenges amid fewer flights and poor scheduling, highways will become increasingly important for travelers needing to connect.

EAS Has Put Certain Nonhub Airports at a Competitive Disadvantage

According to an industry association we spoke with, market distortions created by EAS subsidies can affect the ability of non-EAS nonhub airports to secure and maintain air service. In some instances, the non-EAS communities that lost air service believed they would have been able to keep it had there been no EAS airports nearby. EAS subsidies provide ongoing assurance of revenues to airlines providing EAS. An airline that typically serves small communities may have to decide between serving an EAS community with guaranteed

³⁸As of November 2025, SPI had two daily departures on a regional partner with American Airlines to Chicago. For more information about SPI and other selected airports, see appendix II.

³⁹William Swelbar and Michael Boyd, *The Real Third Rail Issue: Continuing to Believe That Pilot Training Requirements Will Get Changed OR That There is Some Other Airline/Aircraft Fix to the Conundrum – Because Small Community Air Service is an Entitlement?* (Swelbar-Zhong Consultancy and Boyd Group International, Inc., March 2022).

revenue, and a non-EAS community that could be marginally profitable but not without risks. According to one airport representative, for example, during and after the COVID-19 pandemic, airlines considered it too financially risky to serve smaller markets using the prorate agreement that had previously allowed regional airlines to earn profits in the absence of subsidies. Instead, some airlines opted to allocate more of their resources to EAS markets, where revenues were assured.⁴⁰ Accordingly, a representative from the American Association of Airport Executives said that if facing a limited supply of pilots and aircraft, an airline may decide to allocate its resources to serve an EAS rather than a non-EAS community.

Furthermore, according to one representative from the National Association of State Aviation Officials, non-EAS communities may face a competitive disadvantage when funding their own revenue guarantees. Nonhub airports that receive federal funds are unable to use their own funds to provide revenue guarantees; rather, they must work with community partners, such as local governments, chambers of commerce, economic development corporations, or others to provide needed funding, putting them at a competitive disadvantage.⁴¹ By contrast, EAS subsidies are federally funded.

The FAA Modernization and Reform Act of 2012 generally limited EAS eligibility to communities that had received EAS-subsidized service in fiscal year 2011.⁴² Of the non-EAS nonhub airports we selected for our review, Dubuque and Rock Springs had previously been eligible for EAS. However, they were among those small communities that were not receiving subsidized service during fiscal year 2011 and consequently lost their EAS eligibility. Community representatives in Dubuque told us that the airport had had sufficient air service at the time, and that the community did not see the need for subsidized service. Given the more recent challenges facing the community, Dubuque is now paying revenue guarantees to American Airlines for one flight per day to Chicago. An airport representative told us that certain airports, like the one in Dubuque, are falling through the cracks between federal programs. EAS provides ongoing support for eligible (and often very small) communities, while SCASDP offers individual, 5-year grants for revenue guarantees to jumpstart new service but no long-term assistance to maintain service. Similarly, Rock Springs needs ongoing subsidized support, according to representatives from Wyoming DOT and the airport, and the airport participates in the state's capacity purchase agreement with SkyWest.

In our prior review of air service to small communities, aviation stakeholders identified options for modifying EAS.⁴³ These options included *reducing EAS* by increasing distance requirements between EAS-eligible communities and other airports to help target EAS to more remote communities, as well as *expanding EAS* by

⁴⁰A regional carrier flying under a prorate agreement receives a percentage of the overall fare paid by the passengers for flights marketed by their partner major carrier(s), shifting the risk to the regional airline, together with any resulting profit.

⁴¹Pursuant to statute and FAA policy, airports that receive federal funding are not able to use airport revenue to provide revenue guarantees. See 49 U.S.C. §§ 47107(b)(1), 47133; FAA Policy Regarding Air Carrier Incentive Program, 88 Fed. Reg. 85,344 (Dec. 7, 2023) (stating that airport revenues must be used for the capital and operating costs of the airport or local airport system, and air carrier operations are not a capital or operating cost).

⁴²Eligibility during this time period also included communities that received a 90-day notice of intent to terminate EAS, but the Secretary of Transportation required the carrier to continue providing such service to the community. Pub. L. No. 112-95, § 422, 126 Stat. 11, 97 (codified as amended at 49 U.S.C. § 41731(a)(1)(D)). These eligibility requirements do not apply to locations in Alaska or Hawaii.

⁴³For more information about these options, see [GAO-24-106681](#).

loosening requirements or allowing previously eligible communities to regain eligibility. Such options would involve statutory changes.⁴⁴

Selected Nonhub Airports Have Taken Steps to Secure Air Service, but Reported Difficulty Providing Ongoing Funding to Maintain It

The non-EAS nonhub airports we selected for our review have each taken several steps to address the challenges discussed above, including leveraging various sources of funding to pay revenue guarantees for air service; offering community-led marketing of air service; providing airport incentives; and planning at the state level. However, several airport and community representatives stressed the difficulty in providing ongoing funding to maintain air service.

Leveraging Various Sources of Funding to Pay Revenue Guarantees for Air Service

Executives at six of the non-EAS nonhub airports we selected for our review have worked to leverage local entities to support air service through revenue guarantees, but they said funding is often limited. In some cases, these communities have also been able to use federal funding through SCASDP grants.⁴⁵ For example:

- Dubuque combined a SCASDP grant with contributions from partners, including the Chamber of Commerce, City of Dubuque, Travel Dubuque, Greater Dubuque Development Corporation, and other local business organizations to pay \$1.9 million for once-per-day air service by Denver Air Connection between Dubuque and Chicago starting in fall 2024. Funds were expended in May 2025, and representatives from the airport told us they were working with their partners to achieve a goal of providing \$1.5 million in additional funding through the end of 2025. Without the funding, airport representatives did not expect the service to continue. They noted that a previously subsidized service ended once the revenue guarantee was exhausted.⁴⁶
- In the absence of SCASDP or other federal funding, in 2023 the community of Wenatchee used public funding from the local regional port authority and solicited contributions from other entities, including local municipalities and businesses, to pay a 1-year, \$500,000 revenue guarantee to Alaska Airlines for a second daily flight between Wenatchee and Seattle. Representatives of the port authority told us that providing ongoing support would be difficult, given that funds were drawn from the agency's general fund and the need for air service must compete with other regional needs. The airport has not yet achieved air service through its active SCASDP grant to provide service between Wenatchee and San Francisco, as described above.
- By contrast, in Grand Junction, a local lodging tax has provided dedicated, ongoing funding through an air service alliance to secure and maintain air service at Grand Junction Regional Airport (GJT). The airport has leveraged these funds for revenue guarantees and marketing, with and without additional support from

⁴⁴These options were identified before the FAA Reauthorization Act of 2024 was enacted. These options would require statutory changes, which, for the most part, were not included in the FAA Reauthorization Act of 2024.

⁴⁵DOT awards SCASDP grants to local government entities. Under 49 U.S.C. § 41743, a SCASDP grant can subsidize air service for no more than 3 years. DOT typically provides a 5-year grant term for projects that target a revenue guarantee to allow the community time to recruit and enter into a revenue guarantee with an air carrier consistent with the terms of the grant. For more information about SCASDP grants used to support air service at the non-EAS nonhub airports selected for our review, see appendix II.

⁴⁶Dubuque had funded a revenue guarantee for leisure service with Avelo Airlines to Orlando, FL. The airline ended the service in October 2024.

SCASDP. According to an airport representative, the community has spent millions of dollars to contribute to the growth of the airport, which was served by three network airlines as of November 2025 (see fig. 8).

Figure 8: Airport Terminal with the Network Airlines Serving Grand Junction Regional Airport (GJT) in Grand Junction, Colorado



Source: GAO. | GAO-26-107751

Note: In addition to service from American Airlines, Delta Air Lines, and United Airlines, Breeze Airways (a low-cost carrier) also provided leisure air service between Grand Junction and four destinations, as of November 2025.

Offering Community-Led Marketing of Air Service

Six of the seven communities in our review have offered marketing services as an incentive to attract air service. These efforts have often been partially funded using SCASDP grants awarded to communities by DOT to help secure service at a local airport. For example, the community of Springfield is currently using a fiscal year 2022 SCASDP grant to market all air service into and out of the airport in Springfield. According to DOT, while communities are not allowed to use SCASDP grants to market a specific air carrier—unless it is in support of new or improved service by that airline—communities may use SCASDP funds to advertise the airport and its air services more generally. According to one industry report, such marketing efforts help increase public awareness of new destinations or airlines, which is especially important in smaller communities where airlines do not typically spend money to market new service.⁴⁷

Providing Airport Incentives

Representatives from each of the airports in our review told us that they generally use all available incentives allowed by FAA, but these options are limited. These incentives may include waiving or reducing landing fees

⁴⁷Airport Cooperative Research Program, *Definitions of Air Service Incentives* (citing Mead and Hunt, Inc., *Northwest Regional Air Service Initiative Handbook: Empowering Pacific Northwest Communities* (2006)).

and other airport fees.⁴⁸ Incentives can reduce airline operating costs, which can make the airport more attractive to airlines. However, waiving or reducing such fees can result in costs to airports that must be paid through other means.

Planning at the State Level

Two of the non-EAS nonhub airports we selected for our review—in Rock Springs and Traverse City—are located in states that currently provide funding for air service through their state aviation programs. In addition, while not directly funding air service development, Washington State DOT was part of a regional effort funded through SCASDP to assist smaller airports—like the one in Wenatchee—with local air service issues in Oregon and Washington.

Examples of Onsite Activities Beyond Commercial Aviation at Selected Nonhub Airports

Each of the seven nonhub airports we selected for our review have other onsite endeavors to support the airport financially, beyond offering commercial air service. For example, Abraham Lincoln Capital Airport in Springfield has developed a solar program and microgrid, which provide power to an on-premises maintenance facility. Dubuque Regional Airport hosts a growing flight school with the University of Dubuque, across the airfield from its commercial terminal (see photo), as well as a fuel facility and general aviation operations.



Source GAO analysis and photo. | GAO-26-107751

- Southwest Wyoming Regional Airport (RKS) in Rock Springs is part of a Wyoming DOT aviation program that contracts with SkyWest to provide air service to four airports in the state through a capacity purchase agreement. Rock Springs has received air service through this program since 2020; previously, the community had been supported intermittently from 2004 through 2019 by a different aviation program administered by the state DOT. Rock Springs was also part of an effort led by the Wyoming DOT to market 10 of the state's airports using funding from a fiscal year 2005 SCASDP grant. See appendix III for more information about Wyoming DOT's air service development programs.
- Cherry Capital Airport (TVC) in Traverse City has received funding from a grant program administered by the Michigan Aeronautics Commission. Started in 1987 to address the loss and decline of commercial air service in many communities in the state, the Michigan Air Service Program distributes funding for air carrier recruitment and retention, as well as other purposes.⁴⁹ Program objectives include assuring the appropriate distribution of air service statewide and supporting quality of life for Michigan residents and

⁴⁸Allowable incentives are governed by statute and FAA policy. 49 U.S.C. §§ 47107, 47133; FAA Policy Regarding Air Carrier Incentive Program, 88 Fed. Reg. 85344 (Dec. 7, 2023).

⁴⁹The program also includes categories for aircraft rescue and firefighting, airport awareness, and capital improvement and equipment. For more information, see Michigan DOT Office of Aeronautics, *Michigan Air Service Program Guidelines, Updated May 2021* (May 26, 2021).

visitors through access to the national air transportation system. According to Michigan DOT officials, the program has historically been funded through the state's aviation fuel tax, and in fiscal year 2023, the Michigan Aeronautics Commission approved grants totaling \$50,000 that were matched with more than \$22,000 in local funds. Officials told us that an additional \$5 million and \$4 million was allocated to the Air Service Program in fiscal years 2024 and 2025, respectively, out of the state's general fund to address air service declines related to the COVID-19 pandemic. Officials said this funding was awarded through competitive grants to individual airports, rather than using the statewide objectives that typically guide the Air Service Program.

- In 2006, state DOTs in Washington and Oregon formed a consortium and cooperated to develop a handbook for small communities in the region.⁵⁰ The effort was partially funded by a SCASDP grant, awarded by DOT for fiscal year 2005 to support a study to help these communities determine what level of air service would best meet their needs and to provide help in securing that service. The handbook provided information on a variety of topics related to air service, including how air service contributes to local economies; the status of the airline industry (e.g., types of airlines and aircraft, and service models); available federal programs; airline decision-making; and community influence on air service decisions (e.g., the community role and airline risk mitigation). The Washington State DOT official we spoke with said that this handbook helped smaller communities set reasonable expectations when seeking to develop or support air service. While now somewhat outdated, the official saw this type of planning as having the potential to integrate aviation system planning into a multimodal approach to address the transportation needs of smaller communities.

Officials from the state DOTs in Michigan, Washington, and Wyoming told us that state or regional support for air service development can be limited by funding and other constraints. Our analysis of SCASDP grants found several other examples of SCASDP funding being used to support state or regional planning efforts, although such uses were infrequent. While the statute enables—and according to agency officials, DOT encourages—applications by groups of communities, DOT most frequently receives individual applications for SCASDP funding, rather than applications that are part of a more holistic assessment of state or regional needs.

Agency Comments

We provided a draft of this report to DOT for review and comment. DOT provided technical comments, which we incorporated as appropriate.

We are sending copies of this report to the appropriate congressional committees, the Secretary of Transportation, and other interested parties. In addition, the report is available at no charge on the GAO website at <https://www.gao.gov>.

If you or your staff have any questions about this report, please contact me at CollinsD@gao.gov. Contact points for our Offices of Congressional Relations and Public Affairs may be found on the last page of this report. GAO staff who made key contributions to this report are listed in appendix IV.

⁵⁰Mead and Hunt, Inc., *Northwest Regional Air Service Initiative Handbook*.

//SIGNED//

Derrick Collins
Director, Physical Infrastructure

Appendix I: Objectives, Scope, and Methodology

The FAA Reauthorization Act of 2024 includes a provision for GAO to conduct a study on the challenges faced by nonhub airports not designated as Essential Air Service (EAS) communities and to recommend ways to help secure and retain flight schedules using existing federal programs, such as the Small Community Air Service Development Program (SCASDP).⁵¹

This report describes (1) how scheduled passenger air service at nonhub airports changed from 2018 through 2024, according to key metrics; (2) the extent to which SCASDP can help nonhub airports not receiving EAS-subsidized service (non-EAS nonhub airports) secure and maintain scheduled passenger air service; and (3) challenges selected non-EAS nonhub airports identified in securing or maintaining air service, and how these airports have addressed the challenges. This report builds on our 2024 report on air service to small communities.⁵²

Objective 1

Airport Categorization

To address the first objective, we analyzed data from the Department of Transportation (DOT) that track changes in air service. We used Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) enplanement data for 2018 to identify all the commercial service airports in the contiguous United States and grouped the airports into the following five categories following the statutory categorization:⁵³

- **Large hub.** Receives 1 percent or more of annual U.S. commercial enplanements.
- **Medium hub.** Receives at least 0.25 percent but less than 1.0 percent of annual U.S. commercial enplanements.
- **Small hub.** Receives at least 0.05 percent but less than 0.25 percent of annual U.S. commercial enplanements.
- **Nonhub.** Receives less than 0.05 percent of annual U.S. commercial enplanements but has more than 10,000 annual enplanements.
- **Non-primary commercial service, nonhub (non-primary nonhub).** Has scheduled passenger service and has at least 2,500 but no more than 10,000 annual enplanements.

We also identified airports that had received subsidized air service through DOT's EAS program for at least 1 year from 2018 through 2024.

⁵¹Pub. L. No. 118-63, § 774B, 138 Stat. 1025, 1299.

⁵²GAO, *Commercial Aviation: Trends in Air Service to Small Communities*, [GAO-24-106681](#) (Washington, D.C.: Sept. 25, 2024).

⁵³A commercial service airport is a publicly owned airport with at least 2,500 annual enplanements (i.e., passenger boardings) and scheduled air carrier service.

Data Sources

We used a variety of data in our analysis (see table 2). For the data sources identified below, we reviewed related documentation and correspondence with DOT officials and representatives of Cirium, a private data contractor housing various aviation data on its platform. We also conducted electronic data testing for missing data and obvious errors. We determined these data were sufficiently reliable for the purpose identified in the “uses” column of table 2.

Table 2: Description of Data Used for Analysis of Air Service

Data	Source	Description	Uses
2018–2024 T-100 domestic segment data ^a	DOT, Bureau of Transportation Statistics. Data downloaded from Cirium, a private data contractor housing various aviation data on its platform.	Domestic nonstop segment data reported by carriers, including carrier, origin, destination, departures performed, available seats, passengers onboard, etc.	To track trends in level of air service, as measured by key metrics.
2018–2023 airport hub category data	DOT/ FAA	Airports grouped into five categories based on passenger boarding data.	To assign each airport to its size group and to calculate the weight associated with each airport size category used in the calculation of connectivity index.
2018–2024 Essential Air Service (EAS) reports ^b	DOT	Information on each EAS contract, including the origin airport code.	To define EAS airports over our period of analysis.

Source: GAO’s analysis of Department of Transportation (DOT) and Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) data. | GAO-26-107751

Notes: We used the various data sources listed in the table to track trends in scheduled passenger air service to nonhub airports from calendar years 2018 through 2024. For each data source, we used the most recent data available at the time of the analysis.

^aAccording to DOT officials, DOT periodically revises historical T-100 data after carriers resubmit their data. We downloaded the T-100 data for 2018 through 2023 in March 2024, and the T-100 data for 2024 in April 2025.

^bEAS provides federal subsidies to air carriers to serve certain eligible communities.

Data Preparation

We downloaded the T-100 domestic segment data from Cirium, a private data contractor housing various aviation data on its platform.⁵⁴ This database reports monthly air carrier traffic information from certified U.S. air carriers. The data include the origin and destination of flights, operating carrier, number of departures scheduled and performed, passengers, and seats. In addition to operating carriers, Cirium includes the associated marketing carriers reported in the schedule data.

We prepared the T-100 data with a few additional filters and restrictions. We restricted the data by dropping flights with either an origin or destination outside the contiguous United States. Additionally, we retained flights that represent scheduled passenger service and dropped observations with zero departures performed, zero available seats, and zero passengers transported, which are potentially erroneous. For observations with load factors—a measure of the percentage of seats occupied by passengers—greater than 100 percent that are likely erroneous, we replaced passenger count with available seats. Moreover, we deleted flights marketed by

⁵⁴DOT’s T-100 traffic reports contain domestic market data reported by both U.S. and foreign air carriers, including carrier, origin, destination, and service class for enplaned passengers, freight, and mail when both origin and destination airports are located within the boundaries of the United States and its territories.

foreign carriers. We also restricted both origin and destination airports to those with at least 2,500 enplanements in 2018, based on the statutory definition of public airports with commercial service. We further restricted the data to include routes with at least 52 annual departures, which is equivalent to about one departure per week.

Data Analysis

We conducted our analysis on a directional basis—that is, a route departing from airport A to destination airport B is treated as a separate route from a route departing from airport B to destination airport A—and used the marketing carrier instead of the operating carrier to identify the airline. We calculated the average (mean) for two key metrics each year to track the changes in air service for nonhub airports and airports of other sizes, as well as for nonhub airports receiving or not receiving EAS subsidized air service.

Average daily departures per route. For each route, we used annual departures and divided this number by the number of days per year to calculate average daily departures per year. We then calculated the mean of route-level average daily departures to calculate average daily departures for each airport. For airports within each size category, we calculated the mean of average daily departures of all the routes departing from airports of each size category each year.

Connectivity index score. We used Wittman and Swelbar’s Airport Connectivity Quality Index (ACQI), which is a function of the frequency of available scheduled flights, the quantity and quality of destinations serviced, and the quantity and quality of connecting destinations.⁵⁵

⁵⁵Michael Wittman and William Swelbar, “Modeling Changes in Connectivity at U.S. Airports: A Small Community Perspective,” Report No. ICAT-2013-05 (June 2013).

Let A be a set of origin airports and H be a set of airport types. The ACQI score for an airport $\alpha \in A$ is:

$$ACQI_{\alpha} = \sum_{h \in H} f_{\alpha,h} d_{\alpha,h} w_h + \alpha \sum_{h' \in H} d'_{\alpha,h'} w_{h'}$$

Where:

- $f_{\alpha,h}$ is the average number of daily scheduled flights per destination from airport α to airport type h .
- $d_{\alpha,h}$ is the number of nonstop destinations of type h served from airport α .
- $d'_{\alpha,h'}$ is the number of connecting destinations of type h' served from airport α .⁵⁶
- w_h is a weighting factor based on the quality of airport type h .
- $w_{h'}$ is the weight attached to connecting airport destination, which is calculated the same as w_h .
- α is a scaling factor that weights the importance of nonstop destinations versus one-stop destinations. The scaling factor of 0.125 is chosen for α in the ACQI model.

In other words, the connectivity score can be represented as:

$$ACQI_{\alpha} = (Quality\ of\ nonstop\ service) + Scaling\ Factor * (Quality\ of\ connecting\ service)$$

Based on the formula, an airport’s ACQI score would increase if more flights were offered to an existing nonstop destination (i.e., $f_{\alpha,h}$ increases); if the number of nonstop destinations increased (i.e., $d_{\alpha,h}$ increases); if more connecting service was available from an existing nonstop destination (i.e., $d'_{\alpha,h'}$ increases); or if the quality of existing nonstop or connecting destinations increased (resulting in a change in w_h or $w_{h'}$).

The w_h weight terms are computed by finding the average enplanement levels for each airport type for a given year, and then computing a ratio of each type’s average enplanement level to the large hub average enplanement level. The 2024 enplanement data were not available at the time of the analysis, so we used the 2023 enplanement data as a proxy for 2024 to calculate the weights for 2024. Table 3 lists the weights assigned by airport size group across years.

|

⁵⁶If an airport A can reach a connecting destination D through both connecting airport B and C, D will be counted as one connecting destination to avoid double counting.

Table 3: Weights Assigned by Airport Size Group for Analysis of Connectivity

Airport size group	Year						
	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
Large hub	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
Medium hub	0.23	0.23	0.23	0.24	0.24	0.23	0.23
Small hub	0.05	0.05	0.06	0.06	0.06	0.06	0.06
Nonhub	0.006	0.006	0.007	0.007	0.006	0.006	0.006
Non-primary nonhub	0.0003	0.0008	0.0008	0.0005	0.0006	0.0006	0.0006

Source: GAO analysis of Department of Transportation data. | GAO-26-107751

Note: To calculate the Airport Connectivity Quality Index (ACQI), we assigned weights to the nonstop and connecting airport, where the weights are computed by finding the average enplanement levels for each airport type for a given year, and then computing a ratio of each type's average enplanement level to the large hub average enplanement level.

We first calculated the connectivity index score for each airport. Then we calculated the mean connectivity index score for airports within each size category each year.

Objective 2

To address the second objective, we reviewed options stakeholders identified in our prior work on securing and maintaining air service to small communities. We interviewed DOT officials with the Office of Aviation Analysis, which administers SCASDP, and reviewed applicable statutes and grant applications and awards for SCASDP from fiscal years 2018 through 2023 (the most recent SCASDP award cycle). We also interviewed aviation stakeholders that we selected based on their knowledge of nonhub airports (i.e., the American Association of Airport Executives, the Airport Consultants Council, and the National Association of State Aviation Officials), as well as airport representatives at the selected nonhub airports described below.

Objective 3

To address the third objective, we conducted interviews—and four site visits to nonhub airports—with representatives from a nongeneralizable sample of seven non-EAS nonhub airports (see table 4). We selected these nonhub airports to reflect a variety of service changes and geographic locations. We also based our selection on previously identified challenges to securing and maintaining air service, and on stakeholder suggestions. We assessed service changes from 2018 to 2023 to identify airports that had decreased service (i.e., their average daily departures per route had declined while maintaining higher load factors) or that had increased service (i.e., they had at least a 10-percent increase in average daily departures per route).⁵⁶

⁵⁶We identified our selected airports using our analysis of DOT data from 2018 through 2023, the most recent year of available data at that time.

Table 4: Nongeneralizable Selection of Non-EAS Nonhub Airports for Interviews and Site Visits

Airport	Location
Abraham Lincoln Capital Airport (SPI)	Springfield, IL (visit)
Cherry Capital Airport (TVC)	Traverse City, MI
Dubuque Regional Airport (DBQ)	Dubuque, IA (visit)
Grand Junction Regional Airport (GJT)	Grand Junction, CO (visit)
Hilton Head Island Airport (HHH)	Hilton Head Island, SC
Pangborn Memorial Airport (EAT)	Wenatchee, WA (visit)
Southwest Wyoming Regional Airport in Rock Springs (RKS)	Rock Springs, WY

Source: GAO. | GAO-26-107751

Note: Airports selected were not receiving subsidized service through the Essential Air Service (EAS) program.

In addition, we interviewed state aviation officials that we selected in conjunction with several of these airports, including aviation officials from state departments of transportation in Illinois, Michigan, Washington, and Wyoming. We also interviewed aviation stakeholders selected based on their knowledge of nonhub airports, as described above. Finally, we reviewed interviews and analyses from our prior work on trends in air service to small communities.⁵⁷

We conducted this performance audit from August 2024 to December 2025 in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards. Those standards require that we plan and perform the audit to obtain sufficient, appropriate evidence to provide a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives. We believe that the evidence obtained provides a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives.

⁵⁷[GAO-24-106681](#).

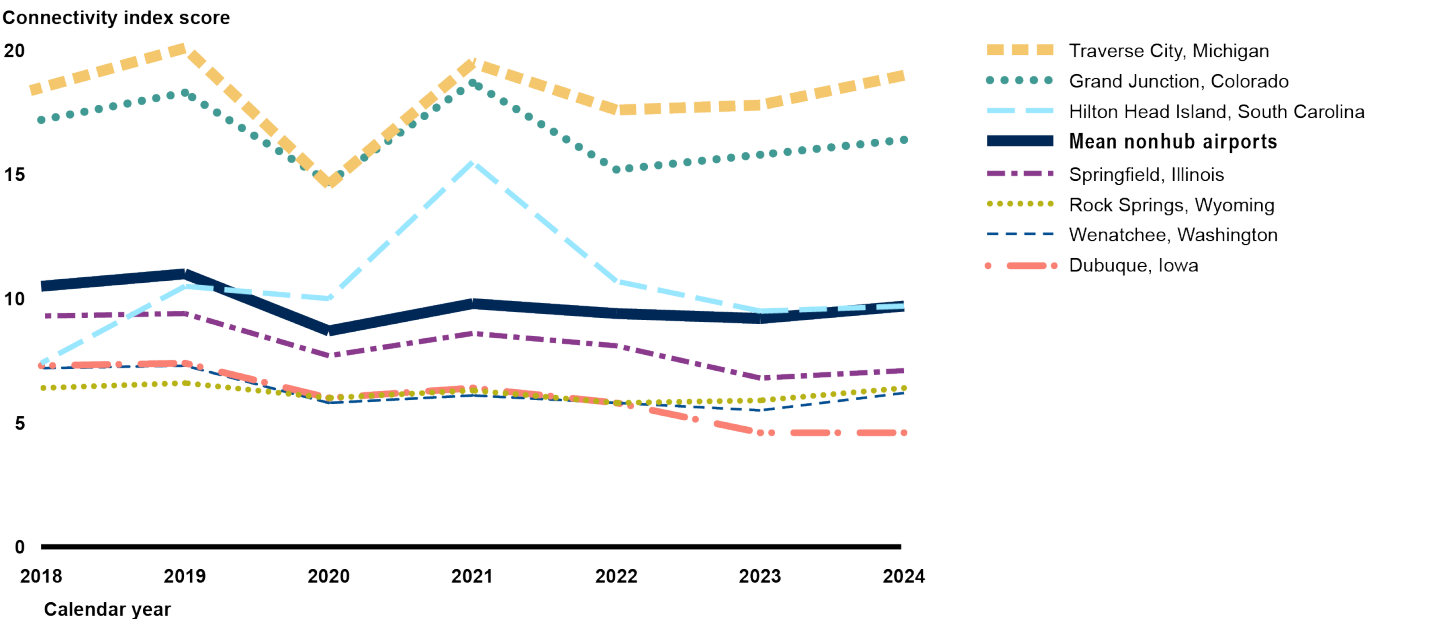
Appendix II: Profiles of Selected Nonhub Airports

We collected information for profiles of each of the seven nonhub primary (nonhub) airports we selected for our review.⁵⁸

Community, airport, and air service. To describe each community and airport, recent changes to air service, and flights currently offered, we interviewed airport and community representatives from October 2024 to May 2025. We also reviewed publicly available information about these communities and airports, such as grant applications and airport websites, press releases, and annual reports, as well as local websites promoting tourism and economic development.

To describe air service trends since 2018, we analyzed changes in each airport’s connectivity index score—a measure of a passenger’s degree of access to the aviation system—from flight data that U.S. passenger airlines reported to the Department of Transportation (DOT) from 2018 through 2024 (see fig. 9).

Figure 9: Connectivity Index Score for Selected Nonhub Airports and Mean Connectivity Index Score for All Nonhub Airports, 2018–2024



Source: GAO analysis of Department of Transportation data. | GAO-26-107751

⁵⁸For this review, we selected a nongeneralizable sample of seven nonhub airports that do not receive subsidized air service through DOT’s Essential Air Service (EAS) program (non-EAS nonhub airports) based on air service changes, previously identified challenges to securing and maintaining air service, geographic location, and stakeholder suggestions. For more information, see appendix I.

Accessible Data for Figure 9: Connectivity Index Score for Selected Nonhub Airports and Mean Connectivity Index Score for All Nonhub Airports, 2018–2024

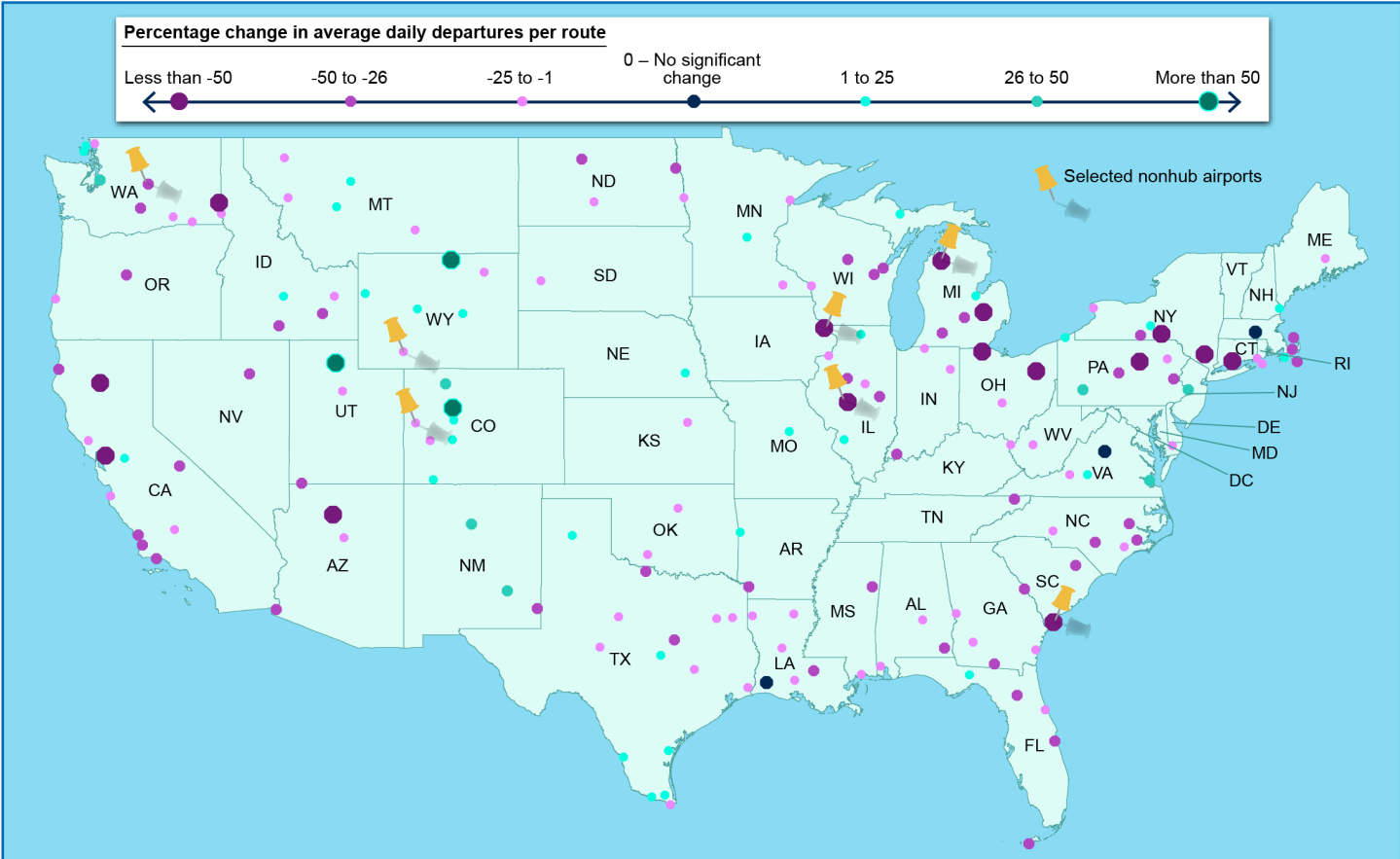
Calendar year	Traverse City, MI	Grand Junction, CO	Hilton Head Island, SC	Mean nonhub airports	Springfield, IL	Rock Springs, WY	Wenatchee, WA	Dubuque, IA
2018	18.5	17.2	7.4	10.5	9.3	6.4	7.3	7.2
2019	20.1	18.3	10.5	11	9.4	6.6	7.4	7.3
2020	14.6	14.7	10	8.7	7.7	6	6	5.8
2021	19.5	18.7	15.5	9.8	8.6	6.3	6.4	6.1
2022	17.6	15.2	10.7	9.4	8.1	5.8	5.8	5.8
2023	17.8	15.8	9.5	9.2	6.8	5.9	5.5	4.6
2024	19	16.4	9.7	9.7	7.1	6.4	6.2	4.6

Source: GAO analysis of Department of Transportation data. | GAO-26-107751

Note: Under statute, nonhub primary airports have less than 0.05 percent but more than 10,000 of annual U.S. commercial enplanements. We used Federal Aviation Administration enplanement data for 2018 to determine airport size.

We also analyzed changes in average daily departures per route for each of the seven airports selected for our review and for non-EAS nonhub airports not receiving subsidized service more generally, as illustrated in figure 10.

Figure 10: Percentage Change from 2018 to 2024 in Average Daily Departures per Route for Nonhub Airports Not Receiving EAS-Subsidized Service, Including Selected Nonhub Airports



Source: GAO analysis of Department of Transportation data. Base map from MapInfo. | GAO-26-107751

Note: Includes average daily departures per route for nonhub primary airports not receiving subsidized service under the Essential Air Service (EAS) program. We conducted our analysis for calendar years. Under statute, nonhub primary airports have less than 0.05 percent but more than 10,000 of annual U.S. commercial enplanements. We used Federal Aviation Administration enplanement data for 2018 to determine airport size.

For the nonhub airports selected for this review, the percentage change in average daily departures per route ranged from -6 percent to -94 percent from 2018 to 2024 (see table 5).

Table 5: Change from 2018 to 2024 in Average Daily Departures per Route for Selected Nonhub Airports

Airport location	Change in average daily departures per route from 2018 to 2024: Number	Change in average daily departures per route from 2018 to 2024: Percentage
Dubuque, IA	2.6 to 0.1	-94%
Hilton Head Island, SC	2.7 to 1	-65
Grand Junction, CO	2.1 to 2	-6
Rock Springs, WY	1.8 to 1.7	-8
Springfield, IL	1.6 to 0.6	-61
Traverse City, MI	2.2 to 1	-56
Wenatchee, WA	3.1 to 2	-36

Source: GAO analysis of Department of Transportation (DOT) data. | GAO-26-107751

Airport catchment and leakage. We described the catchment for each airport, which includes the geographic area from which an airport can reasonably expect to draw commercial air service passengers. An airport's catchment area is affected by several factors, including geographic and access considerations, as well as proximity to competing airports. Representatives from each selected airport provided information about passenger leakage, which occurs when travelers from one airport's catchment area, or core market, drive to another airport for air service or to their final destination. As discussed above, leakage may occur when travelers seek out better flight options, lower fares, or more convenient air service at a more distant airport.

Participation in the Small Community Air Service Development Program. To describe each airport's participation in DOT programs, we collected information through interviews with individual airports and a review of federal grant information. Relevant programs include (1) the Small Community Air Service Development Program (SCASDP), which provides federal grants to fund strategies to improve air service and address airfare issues at eligible communities; and (2) Essential Air Service (EAS), which provides federal subsidies to air carriers serving certain eligible small communities.

ABRAHAM LINCOLN CAPITAL AIRPORT (SPI)



Springfield, Illinois

As the capital of Illinois, Springfield has a robust and diverse economic base, according to a SCASDP application. The state government is the largest employer in the region, with about 18,000 employees, followed by healthcare, education, and private industry and services. Springfield stakeholders told us in December 2024 that the total employed population was rising, the average wage was the highest in the region, and unemployment was the lowest in the region.



Airport

SPI covers approximately 2,300 acres and has three runways.

In addition to commercial air service, activities at the airport include an onsite maintenance, repair, and overhaul facility; an Air National Guard engine repair facility; and an air operations center. According to airport representatives, SPI also has an onsite solar farm, and SPI plans to accommodate electric and hybrid-electric aircraft, to possibly generate and use hydrogen fuel, and to accommodate an electric vertical takeoff and landing (eVTOL) training and maintenance facility. Future plans also include pilot training programs with Southern Illinois University.



Source: Abraham Lincoln Capital Airport. | GAO-26-107751



Air Service

As of November 2025, American Airlines was the only network carrier serving the airport, with daily flights to Chicago provided by a mix of regional affiliates—Air Wisconsin, SkyWest, and Envoy, according to airport representatives. American had flown to various destinations from SPI, but in June 2023 ended service to Dallas in response to the ongoing pilot shortage and elimination of its 50-seat regional jets at Dallas Fort Worth International. United Airlines, which had served the airport since the 1980s, also exited Springfield in May 2023. Both Allegiant Air and Breeze Airways also provided leisure service to Florida.

In July 2025, American announced plans to reinstate an early morning flight to Chicago. As of November 2025, SPI had two daily flights to O'Hare International on 65-seat regional jets.



Airport Catchment and Leakage

According to a SCASDP application, more than 533,000 people lived within a 60-minute drive of SPI as of 2022. Nearby airports include Decatur, an EAS nonhub (DEC, 54 miles); nonhub Central Illinois Regional (BMI, 70 miles) in Bloomington-Normal; medium hub St. Louis Lambert International (STL, 106 miles); and large hubs Chicago Midway International (MDW, 194 miles) and Chicago O'Hare International (ORD, 203 miles).

According to airport representatives, a study found that, in 2023, SPI captured 9 percent of the travelers in the airport's catchment area, with 61-percent leakage to STL, 14 percent to ORD, and the remainder to other airports such as BMI.



Participation in the Small Community Air Service Development Program

Springfield received a SCASDP award of \$250,000 for marketing to increase public awareness of its remaining service with Allegiant Air, American Airlines, and Breeze Airways in fiscal year 2022. Springfield previously received three other SCASDP awards: \$250,000 for ground handling and marketing to support Allegiant leisure service in fiscal year 2012; \$750,000 for a revenue guarantee to support American Airlines service to Dallas in fiscal year 2008; and \$390,000 for a revenue guarantee, ground handling, and marketing to support new and existing United Airlines service to Washington, D.C., in fiscal year 2006.

Source: GAO analysis and icons. | GAO-26-107751

CHERRY CAPITAL AIRPORT (TVC)



Traverse City, Michigan

Traverse City, located at the south end of Grand Traverse Bay, a 32-mile-long bay of Lake Michigan, is the largest city in northern Michigan and the Upper Peninsula. According to airport representatives, the region has a diverse economic base of industries, including manufacturing and agriculture, and benefits heavily from tourism. According to a SCASDP application, the city, known as the “Cherry Capital of the World,” had more than 6.1 million visitors in 2022, with tourism generating more than \$1 billion annually and supporting nearly 12,000 jobs in the Greater Traverse City area.



Airport

TVC covers 1,026 acres and has two runways. The airport plans to expand its facilities and break ground on a new terminal in 2026.

In addition to commercial air service, activities at the airport include private, corporate air traffic; a flight school/pilot training program with Northwest Michigan College; and an aviation maintenance technician school with the Legacy Aviation Learning Center.



Source: Cherry Capital Airport. | GAO-26-107751



Air Service

Since 2011, TVC has seen growth in both passenger traffic and destinations offered, according to the airport’s 2023 annual report. According to airport representatives, passenger counts more than doubled from 2011, rising to 787,114 passengers in 2024. Over the same period, destinations offered via nonstop service from TVC rose from 5 to 20, provided by seven different airlines (up from three in 2011). Total flights were at a high point in 2019 but fell during the pandemic and in 2022 due to the pilot shortage. However, 2021, 2023, and 2024 were record-setting years for TVC in terms of the number of passengers served.

In June 2025, JetBlue became the seventh airline to provide service from TVC, launching nonstop service to Boston. According to airport representatives, increased passenger demand has translated to larger aircraft for several of the key seasonal routes the airport offers.



Airport Catchment and Leakage

According to airport representatives, TVC served a local population of more than 430,000 in 2024. Nearby airports include small hub Gerald R. Ford International (GRR, 150 miles) in Grand Rapids and large hub Detroit Metro Wayne County (DTW, 262 miles). Other, closer airports include nonhub airports Manistee County/Blacker (MBL, 62 miles) and Pellston Regional/Emmet County (PLN, 87 miles); both airports only have EAS service.

In 2024, TVC reported that the airport had a 43-percent leakage rate, with 19-percent leakage to GRR and 18 percent to DTW. According to a SCASDP application, the remainder leak to other airports such as Chicago O’Hare International (333 miles).



Participation in the Small Community Air Service Development Program

Traverse City received a SCASDP award of \$750,000 for a revenue guarantee and marketing to initiate and support new service to Houston with United Airlines in fiscal year 2022. Traverse City previously received two other SCASDP awards: \$750,000 for a revenue guarantee and marketing campaign for Elite Airlines service to Sarasota in fiscal year 2015; and \$400,000 for a revenue guarantee to expand United’s seasonal service to Denver to year-round in fiscal year 2009. However, due to resource constraints, TVC returned the unexpended funds from the 2009 award to DOT and the service did not expand.

Source: GAO analysis and icons. | GAO-26-107751

DUBUQUE REGIONAL AIRPORT (DBQ)

Dubuque, Iowa



On the banks of the Mississippi River, Dubuque is described as thriving by community representatives. Local businesses include manufacturing, universities, healthcare, and tourism. The Greater Dubuque Development Corporation identifies John Deere as a major employer in the community, with over 2,800 employees. According to a SCASDP application, tourism generates more than \$403 million annually, with airport representatives estimating 2 million visitors a year. Airport representatives also told us that, among local attractions, the Field of Dreams draws baseball teams and fans from across the United States and overseas.



Airport

DBQ covers 1,248 acres and has two intersecting runways. The airport opened a new, \$34-million passenger terminal in 2016. The project was assisted by funding from DOT's Airport Improvement Program.

In addition to commercial air service, activities at the airport include aircraft maintenance and general aviation operations. The University of Dubuque operates a flight school at the airport, with plans to expand, according to airport representatives.



Source: Dubuque Regional Airport. | GAO-26-107751



Air Service

In 2019, American Airlines provided three flights a day to Chicago O'Hare International (ORD) on a 50-seat regional jet, having served DBQ for over 30 years. American suspended service in 2020 and discontinued it altogether in September 2022, citing the pilot shortage.

In November 2024, service from DBQ to ORD resumed via Denver Air Connection. While initially scheduled as a late afternoon departure from DBQ, in May 2025, the daily flight to ORD shifted to depart before 8am. The return flight was in the evening.



Airport Catchment and Leakage

Dubuque borders Wisconsin and Illinois (i.e., the Tri-State area), and, according to a SCASDP application, about 400,000 people lived in the 10-county airport catchment area in 2023. Nearby airports include nonhub Quad Cities International (MLI, 79 miles) in Moline, Illinois; small hub Eastern Iowa Airport in Cedar Rapids (CID, 82 miles); large hubs Chicago O'Hare International (ORD, 163 miles) and Chicago Midway International (MDW, 188 miles); and nonhub Waterloo Regional (ALO, 97 miles), which participates in the EAS program.

In 2018, according to a study done by the airport, the overall leakage rate for travelers in the DBQ catchment area was 77 percent. DBQ had 33-percent leakage to ORD, 15 percent to CID, 11 percent to MLI, and the remainder to other airports such as MDW.



Participation in the Small Community Air Service Development Program

Dubuque received a SCASDP award of \$775,000 for nonstop service to Denver in fiscal year 2018, but the airport was unable to use the award. Dubuque requested termination of the award when it received an award of \$1.5 million for new service to a large or medium hub airport in fiscal year 2022. The community used the new award to obtain service to Chicago. Dubuque previously received two other SCASDP awards: \$500,000 for a revenue guarantee to support nonstop American Airlines service to Dallas in fiscal year 2011; and \$610,000 for marketing to support existing service with American Eagle and other incentives to attract new service in fiscal year 2003. (While Dubuque was once designated as an eligible community for EAS, it is currently ineligible because it did not receive EAS-subsidized service in fiscal year 2011.)

Source: GAO analysis and icons. | GAO-26-107751

GRAND JUNCTION REGIONAL AIRPORT (GJT)



Grand Junction, Colorado

Grand Junction is western Colorado's largest city, sitting between Denver and Salt Lake City and within a 3-hour drive of six national parks. Major employers in Mesa County, which encompasses Grand Junction, include hospitals, Colorado Mesa University, aerospace and aviation technology firms, oilfield services, manufacturing (e.g., ski lifts and armaments), and freight trucking operations. According to an airport representative, tourism is an important part of the economy and drives some of the air travel demand.



Airport

GJT covers 2,800 acres and has two runways. The airport has a major reconstruction project underway to replace the aging, primary runway—which is expected to open in 2030—assisted by funding from DOT's Airport Improvement Program. GJT renovated the passenger terminal in 2019.

In addition to commercial air service, activities at the airport include general aviation, and substantial military and FedEx air cargo operations. The airport is also home to the Western Headquarters of the Bureau of Land Management, Twin Otter International (a survey, surveillance, and research aircraft provider), West Star Aviation (an aircraft maintenance, modifications, and refurbishment installation), and multiple flight schools.



Source: GAO photo. | GAO-26-107751



Air Service

Passenger traffic at GJT was trending upward before the pandemic in 2019, according to airport representatives. Thereafter, several airlines discontinued service from GJT, including Allegiant, an ultra-low-cost carrier, and Delta Connection (SkyWest), which had provided regional service to Salt Lake City for 30 years. SkyWest restarted that service in late 2024 after receiving a revenue guarantee from the community—funded through a SCASDP grant and local lodging taxes from a community organization.

As of November 2025, the airport was served by three network carriers (American, Delta, and United), as well as Breeze Airways.



Airport Catchment and Leakage

GJT draws from a relatively large geographic area that extends into nearby Utah and western Colorado, according to a SCASDP application, and that encompassed approximately 226,000 residents in 2018. GJT sits between two large hub airports, Denver International (DEN, 266 miles) and Salt Lake City International (SLC, 288 miles), and near three nonhub airports: Aspen-Pitkin County (ASE, 124 miles), Eagle County Regional (EGE, 113 miles), and Montrose Regional (MTJ, 67 miles).

In 2019, GJT reported a leakage rate for passengers in its catchment area of about 61 percent. The airport had 46-percent leakage to DEN, where airlines offer nonstop service to more than 200 destinations and lower fares. Other leakage was to ASE (about 6 percent), EGE (about 4 percent), MTJ (about 3 percent), and SLC (about 3 percent).

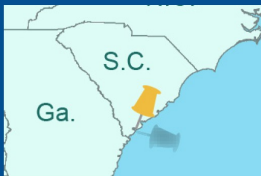


Participation in the Small Community Air Service Development Program

Grand Junction received a SCASDP award of \$950,000 for a revenue guarantee and marketing to secure service to San Francisco in fiscal year 2018. Following the pandemic, Grand Junction worked with DOT to amend the grant to restart Delta Connection (SkyWest) service to Salt Lake City. Grand Junction was also designated as an Air Service Development Zone, pursuant to which DOT worked with the community on means to attract business to the area surrounding the airport, to develop land-use options for the area, and to provide data. Grand Junction had not received a previous SCASDP award.

Source: GAO analysis and icons. | GAO-26-107751

HILTON HEAD ISLAND AIRPORT (HHH/HXD)



Hilton Head, South Carolina

Located off the southeastern coast of South Carolina, Hilton Head is an island accessible to visitors via the airport, by boat, or via a bridge from the mainland. According to a 2025 tourism report, the island had 2.84 million visitors in 2024, with a total economic impact of \$3.72 billion on Hilton Head and the surrounding Beaufort County. According to a SCASDP application, most visitors come to the island during the summer high season and end-of-year holidays.

Airport

HHH covers 175 acres and has one runway that was lengthened in 2018, allowing the airport to service larger, regional jets. In September 2023, the airport began a multiphase renovation project that will triple the terminal's size. The project includes new boarding gate areas and a new security screening checkpoint.

In addition to commercial air service, activities at the airport include general aviation and military operations.



Source: Hilton Head Island Airport. | GAO-26-107751

Air Service

In 2015, American Airlines was providing service from HHH to Charlotte on small, turboprop aircraft. Due to aging aircraft and crew shortages, the reliability of this service declined, resulting in decreased traffic. According to an airport representative, service remained poor until July 2018, when HHH completed its runway extension, allowing larger aircraft to fly in and out of the airport.

Current service with American improved with larger regional jets, and in spring 2019, Delta Airlines and United Airlines also entered the market. According to a SCASDP application, air service fluctuated as traffic decreased in 2020, rose in 2021 as airlines allocated resources to leisure markets, and fell again in 2022, affected by the pilot shortage. As of November 2025, only American provided year-round service from HHH, to Charlotte, with seasonal routes to Chicago, Philadelphia, and Washington, D.C. Delta also provided seasonal service to Atlanta and New York City, and United to Chicago and Newark.

Airport Catchment and Leakage

HHH's catchment area covers Beaufort County, as well as neighboring Jasper and Hampton Counties, according to an airport representative. Nearby airports include small hub Savannah/Hilton Head International (SAV, 40 miles) and medium hub Charleston International (CHS, 99 miles).

According to an airport representative, HHH has a high rate of leakage to other airports. A study conducted just before jet service arrived in 2018 found that HHH retained only 8 percent of travelers within its catchment area, with 62-percent leakage to SAV, 12 percent to CHS, and the remainder to other airports.

Participation in the Small Community Air Service Development Program

Hilton Head received a SCASDP award of \$250,000 for marketing to increase public awareness of the airport and the service it offers in fiscal year 2021. In addition to local funding, the community is working to make potential travelers aware of the distinction between HHH and SAV (which both share "Hilton Head" in their name) and of the increased air service now available due to recent airport upgrades.

Source: GAO analysis and icons. | GAO-26-107751

PANGBORN MEMORIAL AIRPORT (EAT)

Wenatchee, Washington



Wenatchee, which identifies itself as the “Apple Capital of the World,” is located at the junction of the Wenatchee and Columbia Rivers, and just east of the Cascade mountain range. Agriculture, including many orchards, is the leading industry in Chelan and Douglas Counties, which border Wenatchee to the east and west, and tourism also plays a seasonal role in the area’s economy, according to a SCASDP application. More recently, according to airport representatives, technology companies like Microsoft, taking advantage of the low cost of power in the area, have purchased land to build server farms and made further investments.



Airport

EAT covers 760 acres and has one runway. In August 2025, the airport completed a renovation of its general aviation terminal, which will serve as a gate for increased business and corporate traffic.

In addition to commercial air service, activities at the airport include FedEx and UPS air cargo, firefighting, and military operations; medical air transport; and business and corporate air traffic.



Source: Pangborn Memorial Airport. | GAO-26-107751



Air Service

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, EAT had an increasing number of passenger boardings, serving nearly 65,000 passengers in 2019. The airport had three flights a day on Alaska Airlines at that time, according to airport representatives, with a fourth seasonal flight. During the pandemic, the number of flights dropped to one a day and the number of passenger boardings dropped nearly in half, to less than 28,000.

As of July 2025, EAT had two flights a day to Seattle with Alaska Airlines, and although the departure and arrival times were inconvenient for travelers (e.g., a 6 a.m. departure flight and a midnight arrival flight), the percentage of seats filled remained high, according to airport representatives. As of November 2025, Alaska Airlines was the sole airline providing service at EAT.



Airport Catchment and Leakage

EAT’s catchment area included about 150,000 people in 2019, according to a SCASDP application. The airport’s catchment increases during the winter, as heavy snow and avalanche mitigation work can close off the highway, making it difficult to drive across the mountains to Seattle. The closest airports include large hub Seattle-Tacoma International (SEA, 162 miles), small hub Spokane International (GEG, 166 miles), and nonhub Tri-Cities (PSC, 133 miles) in Pasco, Washington.

A 2018 consultant report found that in 2017, Wenatchee had a leakage rate of about 83 percent, with 60-percent leakage to SEA and 17 percent to GEG. According to airport representatives, leakage to GEG and PSC has increased since then.

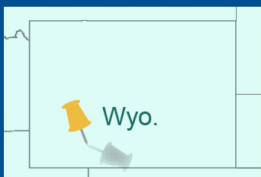


Participation in the Small Community Air Service Development Program

Wenatchee received a SCASDP award of \$750,000 for a revenue guarantee, marketing, and fee waivers to secure non-stop service to San Francisco in fiscal year 2017. However, the community was unable to find an airline to provide this service during the pandemic. Wenatchee previously received a SCASDP award of \$200,000 to market Horizon Air service to Seattle, and to secure and market leisure service on a low-cost carrier to a destination outside of the Pacific Northwest in fiscal year 2013.

Source: GAO analysis and icons. | GAO-26-107751

SOUTHWEST WYOMING REGIONAL AIRPORT (RKS)



Rock Springs, Wyoming

Rock Springs is a rural high desert town located in southwest Wyoming. Major economic sectors in the area include mining for trona (refined soda ash used in glass, detergents, and baking soda) and oil and gas extraction. Sweetwater County, which encompasses Rock Springs and the airport, is located on one of the main thoroughfares to national parks in the state, including Yellowstone and Grand Teton. According to the county's annual report, the travel and tourism industry brought in about \$161 million from visitors in 2021.



Airport

RKS covers 1,242 acres and has two runways. In August 2025, the airport completed a modernization of its commercial terminal, more than doubling the terminal's size and allowing for larger aircraft, according to an airport representative.

In addition to commercial air service, activities at the airport include general aviation, air cargo, medical transport, firefighting, and wildland and wildlife management operations; corporate air traffic; and an aircraft maintenance center and flight school.



Source: Southwest Wyoming Regional Airport. | GAO-26-107751



Air Service

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, RKS had two flights a day on United Express (SkyWest) and anticipated the addition of a third flight in response to strong passenger growth. Instead, according to an airport representative, RKS saw fluctuations in service during the pandemic, dropping to one flight per day in 2020, then regaining a second flight in 2021, before losing that flight again in 2022.

RKS participates in Wyoming DOT's air service program and currently receives subsidized service from SkyWest. Accordingly, in 2023 the airport added a second flight 2 days a week, and in 2024 the flight became a daily offering. According to Wyoming officials, SkyWest worked closely with the airport to improve scheduling, and as a result passenger boardings have increased. In addition, an airport representative said that through June 2025, RKS had seen 24 straight months of passenger growth.



Airport Catchment and Leakage

In 2024, the region surrounding Rock Springs had an estimated population of nearly 41,300. Nearby airports include large hubs Salt Lake City International (SLC, 197 miles) and Denver International (DEN, 338 miles).

A 2025 report from Wyoming DOT's Aeronautics Division found that Rock Springs had a leakage rate of 74 percent, with 68-percent leakage to SLC and 6 percent to DEN.



Participation in the Small Community Air Service Development Program

The community of Rock Springs has not received a SCASDP award specifically for its airport. However, Wyoming DOT received an award of \$800,000 for marketing to conduct a statewide campaign advertising Wyoming's commercial service airports in fiscal year 2005. The campaign increased public awareness of the availability of local air service, improving retention at the state's airports. (In addition, Rock Springs was previously designated as an eligible community for EAS but according to a state DOT report, left the program in 2006 when the community attained a sustainable air service market. Rock Springs currently remains ineligible for EAS because it did not receive EAS-subsidized service in fiscal year 2011, but an airport representative said that the airport is no longer sustainable without support.)

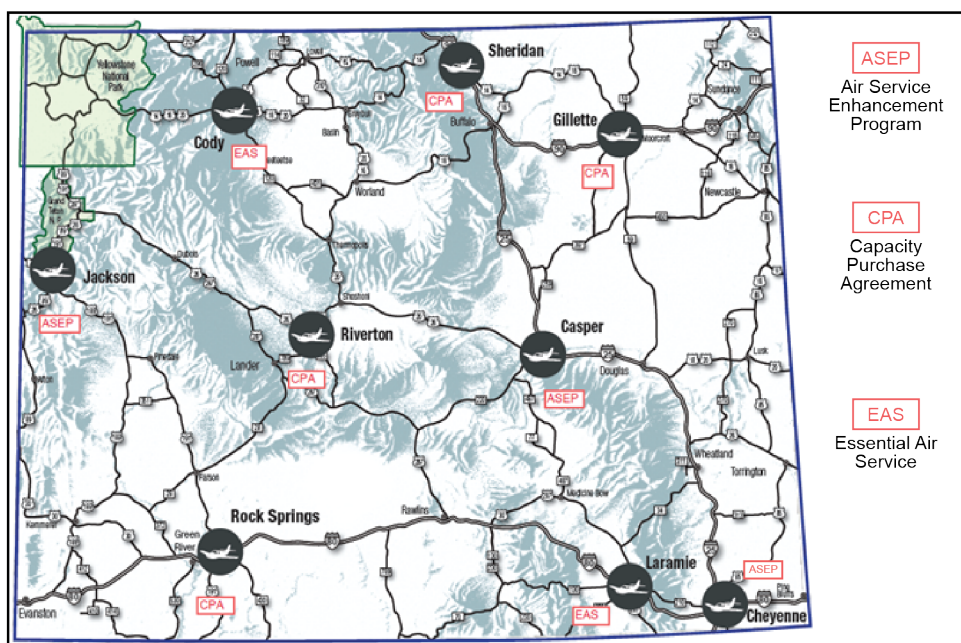
Source: GAO analysis and icons. | GAO-26-107751

Appendix III: Air Service Programs in Wyoming

The majority of Wyoming's airports face challenges in securing and maintaining air service, according to a 2018 state plan for improving commercial air service, given the state's small population and far-flung communities.⁵⁹ Recognizing these challenges, the state's legislature has provided support to address air service deficiencies and build stability throughout the state through two programs administered by the Aeronautics Division within Wyoming Department of Transportation (DOT). The Air Service Enhancement Program (ASEP) provides grants to individual communities for air service development, whereas the Capacity Purchase Agreement (CPA) program contracts with an airline to provide service to other airports.⁶⁰

Wyoming's programs are unique, according to several of the stakeholders we spoke with, because they seek to promote air service statewide. All nine of Wyoming's commercial airports have received air service with state or federal support, either from one of Wyoming's two funding programs or from the Essential Air Service (EAS) program (see fig. 11).⁶¹

Figure 11: Wyoming Commercial Air Service Airports Receiving Subsidized Air Service in Calendar Year 2024



Source: Wyoming Department of Transportation. | GAO-26-107751

Note: The EAS program provides federal subsidies to air carriers to serve certain eligible communities. ASEP and CPA are programs administered by Wyoming Department of Transportation to address air service deficiencies throughout the state. Riverton, Rock Spring, and Sheridan participated in EAS until 2006, when the airports in these communities were deemed no longer in need of a subsidy.

⁵⁹Wyoming Department of Transportation, *Commercial Air Service Improvement Plan* (July 2018).

⁶⁰Wyo. Stat. §§ 10-3-601, 10-7-104.

⁶¹As discussed above, the Department of Transportation's EAS program provides subsidized air service to eligible communities throughout the United States and in Puerto Rico.

Air Service Enhancement Program (ASEP). A grant program created by the state legislature in 2004, ASEP is administered by Wyoming’s Aeronautics Commission to help communities pay airlines minimum revenue guarantees for both “primary” and “growth” service.⁶² The program prioritizes air service on a network carrier with a minimum of two flights (and up to three flights) daily to a hub airport. When used to secure such “primary” service, state funding requires a 40-percent local match. By contrast, if a community pursues “growth” service, such as on a low-cost carrier like Avelo for leisure travel, then the state funding requires a 60-percent local match. While ASEP was described in the state’s 2018 Commercial Air Service Improvement Plan as a good return on investment, the program had not addressed the long-term goal of securing reliable air service throughout the state.⁶³ In response, the state DOT convened a working group pursuant to state statute that developed a new model using a statewide capacity purchase agreement.

Capacity Purchase Agreement (CPA). Under the CPA program, Wyoming contracted with one airline—SkyWest Airlines, operating for United Airlines—to purchase air service capacity for four communities: Gillette, Riverton, Rock Springs, and Sheridan. (Cheyenne joined the program for the new fiscal year beginning July 2025.) Through this contract, state officials, community stakeholders, and others worked to obtain air service for selected communities as a group, rather than seeking to obtain air service individually with minimum revenue guarantees. Officials with the state DOT’s Aeronautics Division told us the CPA program gave communities negotiating advantages, reduced market fragmentation, and—by requiring local funding matches—incentivized communities to ensure that the resulting air service succeeded. Local communities provide a 40-percent match to state funding, according to state officials.

According to state officials and airport representatives we spoke with, communities in the CPA program have been able to negotiate flight schedules and have worked with SkyWest to help the airline retain passengers. Aeronautics Division officials told us the CPA communities did not lose all air service during the COVID-19 pandemic, as some larger, much less remote communities did. Moreover, the community of Gillette will exit the program in 2026, having secured air service with United Airlines to Denver that will not require state subsidies. State officials and an airport representative from Rock Springs told us, however, that despite the CPA program’s successes, air service costs have gone up significantly in the last few years and threaten the program’s sustainability. In the absence of additional state funding, state DOT officials anticipate that the CPA program will be exhausted by July 1, 2026.⁶⁴

⁶²In this context, primary air service involves scheduled commercial service to a hub airport where a traveler can readily connect with a mainline carrier. By contrast, growth service involves service beyond basic need, including service to a variety of destinations to increase tourism, typically involving low-cost carriers focused on leisure travel.

⁶³Wyoming DOT, *Commercial Air Service Improvement Plan* (July 2018).

⁶⁴According to a state DOT official, the CPA program is funded by appropriations from the Legislative Stabilization Reserve Account, which is akin to the state’s rainy-day fund.

Appendix IV: GAO Contact and Staff Acknowledgments

GAO Contact

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Staff Acknowledgments

In addition to the contact named above, Jonathan Carver (Assistant Director), Molly Laster (Analyst in Charge), Paul Aussendorf, Caroline Christopher, Sara Daleski, Melanie Diemel, Kaitlin Farquharson, Gina Hoover, Ying Long, Dan Luo, John Mingus, Rebecca Morrow, James Russell, Laurel Voloder, and Lauren Wice made key contributions to this report.

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