AVIATION SECURITY PROGRAMS

TSA Should Clarify Compliance Program Guidance and Address User Concerns with Its Data Systems

GAO Highlights

Why GAO Did This Study

Constant threats to passenger aviation require continuous and effective security programs. Since 2020, over 1 billion passengers traveled on flights within the United States. TSA is responsible for securing the nation's aviation transportation system by ensuring air carriers and airport operators comply with security requirements.

GAO was asked to review TSA's efforts to implement security programs. This report examines (1) how TSA inspections are designed to improve aviation security compliance, (2) how TSA addressed known instances of noncompliance from fiscal years 2017 through 2021, and (3) the extent TSA has experienced challenges transitioning to a new data compliance platform and steps taken to address them. GAO reviewed TSA documentation for its inspections and investigations and observed TSA compliance staff in five airport field offices selected based on location and the number of passengers on board aircraft in 2019. GAO also interviewed TSA officials and representatives from those five airport operators as well as the eight largest passenger air carriers.

What GAO Recommends

GAO is recommending that TSA (1) develop guidance for when an action plan may be effective in resolving noncompliance, (2) assess stakeholder concerns about transitioning to a new compliance platform, and (3) develop lessons learned from other systems' transitions. The Department of Homeland Security concurred with all three recommendations.

What GAO Found

The Department of Homeland Security's Transportation Security Administration (TSA) conducted about 28,000 inspections in 2021 to identify violations and improve security for domestic airports and passenger air carriers. If TSA identifies a violation, it can take enforcement actions ranging from counseling to civil penalties.

TSA allows airports and air carriers to develop an action plan that invests their own resources to address violations in lieu of a civil penalty. The plans partner TSA with airports and air carriers to identify the root cause of a violation. Most of the airport and air carrier officials GAO spoke with like having action plans as an option. However, TSA guidance is not clear as to when the plans are appropriate to use, such as for systemic violations. Developing and sharing additional guidance could help TSA and its partners more efficiently use their resources.

Transportation Security Administration Inspector Conducting Inspection of Airport Equipment

Source: GAO. | GAO-22-105063

In March 2021, TSA transitioned to a new computer platform that inspectors are to use to record information from their compliance work. Inspectors at each of the five field offices GAO visited said challenges using this platform have affected their ability to capture compliance data. For example, some of these inspectors said TSA did not adequately consult with or train users when it began transitioning data to the new platform. As a result, inspectors said they cannot edit required key data fields, such as updating points of contact or adding new regulated entities. TSA is addressing some issues, but has not fully assessed user concerns, such as the need for better communication. Assessing concerns could help TSA maximize its data system.

TSA plans to transition nine more data systems to its new platform, but has not developed a broad set of lessons learned of staff's experiences from other systems' transitions. Developing lessons learned will help TSA better ensure it mitigates past challenges during future transitions.

United States Government Accountability Office