GAO Highlights

Highlights of GAO-15-247, a report to congressional requesters

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FEDERAL AVIATION ADMINISTRATION

Improved Tracking of Results Needed to Provide Confidence in Benefits of Streamlining Activities

Why GAO Did This Study

As fiscal pressures facing the federal government continue, so too does the need for federal agencies to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of programs and activities. Section 812 of the FAA Modernization and Reform Act of 2012 mandated that FAA review its programs, offices, and organizations to, among other things, identify and address inefficient processes, wasteful practices, and duplication. In response, FAA identified 36 initiatives, including centralizing administrative functions and modernizing records management.

GAO was asked to examine FAA's progress to streamline and reform the agency as Congress considers reauthorizing FAA in fiscal year 2015. GAO examined how FAA determined the status of initiatives and the extent to which its efforts to implement initiatives were consistent with selected key practices for organizational transformations. Since each initiative sought to streamline or reform FAA, GAO identified four key practices for organizational transformations as applicable to these initiatives. GAO assessed FAA's efforts by comparing FAA documents to the selected key practices and interviewing agency officials leading each initiative.

What GAO Recommends

As Congress considers FAA reauthorization, GAO suggests that Congress consider requiring FAA to track and report on the actual results of future agency-reform efforts. GAO recommends that FAA take steps to capture the results of improvement initiatives in its planned database for process improvements. The Department of Transportation agreed with the recommendation.

View GAO-15-247. For more information, contact Gerald L. Dillingham, Ph.D. at (202) 512-2834 or dillinghamg@gao.gov.

What GAO Found

The Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) used a decentralized process to track the status of streamlining and reform initiatives identified in response to the Section 812 mandate in the FAA Modernization and Reform Act of 2012. FAA's actions to implement the initiatives were mostly consistent with three key practices for organizational transformations but were less consistent with the key practice of adopting leading practices for results-oriented reporting, which includes using performance measures to show progress toward achieving results. Without information on the results of the initiatives, FAA and Congress cannot have confidence that FAA's efforts streamlined and reformed the agency.

Decentralized process: The Office of Finance and Management (AFN)—which led FAA's response to the Section 812 mandate—used a decentralized process to track initiatives. Individual offices responsible for the initiatives determined their status using varied definitions for "implemented." For example, FAA considered an initiative to centralize leadership training "implemented" after officials created a plan for developing a series of courses, while FAA will consider an ongoing initiative to create standard procedures for the Office of Airports "implemented" after officials develop and deploy 24 new, standard procedures. As of January 2015, FAA considered 33 of the 36 initiatives implemented.

FAA's actions generally consistent with three key practices: GAO found that FAA's actions to implement the initiatives were mostly consistent for three key practices for organizational transformations—dedicate an implementation team, set implementation goals and a timeline, and establish a communication strategy. For example, FAA's actions were consistent with establishing a communication strategy for 30 of 36 initiatives and partially consistent for 6 of 36 initiatives.

FAA's actions less consistent with key practice regarding results-oriented reporting: GAO found that FAA's actions were inconsistent with this key practice for 3 of 36 initiatives, partially consistent for 12 of the 36, and consistent for 21 of 36. For example, for an initiative that was partially consistent, officials said that until they develop performance measures for the effect of the initiative, they would measure only whether staff use the new procedures. FAA's limited efforts to measure performance or outcomes of the initiatives hinder its ability to assess the initiatives' results. AFN has neither required offices to track performance measures nor made a specific effort to track any common measures across initiatives. As a result, offices used a range of performance measures to report results. GAO has previously found that information on results is critical for improving program performance and that agencies should have measures for the intended results of streamlining efforts—like cost savings and customer service—to help decision makers improve program performance. Actions to implement most of the 36 initiatives are continuing, and FAA plans to create a database to track these initiatives. Moving forward, FAA also plans to use the database to track other process improvement activities. To date, FAA has not decided what information to capture in the database but initially plans to include only descriptive information on each initiative. Lastly, Section 812 did not require FAA to track or report to Congress on the initiatives' results. By requiring such tracking and reporting, Congress could help ensure that FAA provides information on the results of a reform mandate, if required of FAA in the next authorization.