GAO Highlights

EXPLOSIVES DETECTION CANINES

TSA Has Enhanced Its Canine Program, but Opportunities May Exist to Reduce Costs

Why GAO Did This Study

TSA has implemented a multilayered system composed of people, processes, and technology to protect the nation's transportation systems. One of TSA's security layers is comprised of nearly 800 deployed explosives detection canine teams—a canine paired with a handler. These teams include PSC teams trained to detect explosives on passengers and conventional canines trained to detect explosives in objects, such as cargo.

In January 2013, GAO issued a report on TSA's explosives detection canine program. This testimony addresses the steps TSA has taken since 2013 to enhance its canine program and further opportunities to assess the program.

This statement is based on GAO's January 2013 report, a June 2014 testimony, and selected updates conducted in February 2016 on canine training and operations. The products cited in this statement provide detailed information on GAO's scope and methodology. For the selected updates, GAO reviewed the president's fiscal year 2017 budget request for TSA and interviewed TSA officials on changes made to NEDCTP since June 2014, the last time GAO reported on the program.

What GAO Recommends

GAO is making no new recommendations in this statement.

What GAO Found

The Transportation Security Administration (TSA) has taken steps to enhance its National Explosives Detection Canine Team Program (NEDCTP) since GAO's 2013 report, but further opportunities exist for TSA to assess its canine program and potentially reduce costs.

TSA Uses Data to Assess Canine Team Proficiency and Utilization: In January 2013, GAO reported that TSA needed to take actions to analyze NEDCTP data and ensure canine teams are effectively utilized. GAO recommended that TSA regularly analyze available data to identify program trends and areas that are working well and those in need of corrective action to guide program resources and activities. TSA concurred, and in June 2014, GAO reported that the agency had taken actions that address the recommendation. GAO subsequently closed the recommendation as implemented in August 2014. Since then, according to TSA officials, the agency has continued to enhance its canine program. For example, TSA reported that it requires canine teams to train on all explosives training aids they must be able to detect—any explosive used to test and train a canine—in all search areas (e.g., aircraft), every 45 days.

TSA has Deployed PSC Teams to the Highest-Risk Airports: GAO found in January 2013 that passenger screening canine (PSC) teams were not being deployed to the highest-risk airports as called for in TSA's 2012 Strategic Framework or utilized for passenger screening. GAO recommended that TSA coordinate with airport stakeholders to deploy future PSC teams to the highest-risk airports and ensure that deployed teams were utilized as intended. TSA concurred, and in June 2014, GAO reported that PSC teams had been deployed or allocated to the highest-risk airports. In January 2015, GAO closed the recommendation as implemented after TSA deployed all remaining PSC teams to the highest-risk airports and all teams were being utilized for passenger screening.

Opportunities May Exist for TSA to Reduce Canine Program Costs: GAO reported in 2013 that TSA began deploying PSC teams prior to determining their operational effectiveness and identifying where within the airport these teams would be most effectively utilized. GAO recommended that TSA take actions to comprehensively assess the effectiveness of PSCs. TSA concurred and has taken steps to determine the effectiveness of PSC teams and where in the airport to optimally deploy such teams. However, TSA did not compare the effectiveness of PSCs and conventional canines in detecting explosives odor on passengers to determine if the greater cost of training PSCs is warranted. In December 2014, TSA reported that it did not intend to do this assessment because of the liability of using conventional canines to screen persons when they had not been trained to do so. GAO closed the recommendation as not implemented, stating that conventional canines currently work in close proximity with people as they patrol airport terminals, including ticket counters and curbside areas. GAO continues to believe that opportunities may exist for TSA to reduce costs if conventional canines are found to be as effective at detecting explosives odor on passengers as PSCs.