

# GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-18-552](#), a report to congressional committees

## Why GAO Did This Study

TSA is responsible for ensuring that all airline passengers and their property are screened for items that could pose a threat to airplanes and passengers at 440 airports across the United States. Since 2016, TSO Basic Training—initial training for newly hired TSOs, including both TSA-employed and private screeners—has consisted of an intensive two-week course at the TSA Academy located at FLETC. TSA has obligated about \$53 million for the program from its inception through March 2018. In 2015 and 2017, the Department of Homeland Security Inspector General raised questions about the effectiveness of checkpoint screening, which prompted concerns about training.

GAO was asked to review TSA's training of new TSOs. This report (1) describes the reasons why TSA established the TSO Basic Training program; (2) discusses factors OTD considers when updating TSO Basic Training curriculum; and (3) assesses the extent to which TSA evaluates its TSO Basic Training program. GAO reviewed documents on the development and modification of TSO Basic Training curriculum; visited FLETC; interviewed TSA officials; and compared TSA's program evaluation to leading practices.

## What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that TSA establish specific goals and performance measures for the TSO Basic Training program. TSA concurred with the recommendation.

View [GAO-18-552](#). For more information, contact Nathan Anderson at (206) 287-4804 or [andersonn@gao.gov](mailto:andersonn@gao.gov).

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## AVIATION SECURITY

# Basic Training Program for Transportation Security Officers Would Benefit from Performance Goals and Measures

## What GAO Found

The Transportation Security Administration (TSA) established the Transportation Security Officer (TSO) Basic Training program at the TSA Academy at the Federal Law Enforcement Training Centers (FLETC) in Glynco, Georgia to obtain benefits from centralized training. Prior to the Basic Training program, TSO training was conducted at individual airports, often by TSOs for whom instruction was a collateral duty. According to a business case developed by TSA for Congress in 2017 and TSA officials, TSA expected implementation of the TSO Basic Training program to provide efficiencies to the delivery of new-hire training for TSOs and to enhance the professionalism and morale of newly hired screeners. For example, GAO observed that TSO Basic Training facilities have airport checkpoint equipment and x-ray image simulators for students to practice skills, eliminating the challenge of finding available equipment and training times in a busy airport environment. According to program officials, centralized training also provides trainees with an increased focus on the TSA mission and instills a common culture among TSOs.

TSA's Office of Training and Development (OTD) updates and modifies the TSO Basic Training curriculum in response to evolving security threats and evaluations of effectiveness, among other factors. For example, OTD holds regular meetings with TSA's Office of Security Operations—the office responsible for managing TSO performance—to discuss issues such as imminent threats. The offices also discuss analyses of TSO effectiveness identified through covert tests, in which role players attempt to pass threat objects—such as knives, guns, or simulated improvised explosive devices—through the screening checkpoints. The two offices identify ways to address issues identified in covert testing, which are then incorporated into TSO Basic Training. OTD also gathers input from TSO Basic Training instructors and from participants to adjust training curriculum.

TSA has implemented a training evaluation model but has not yet established specific program goals and performance measures to assess TSO Basic Training. The Kirkpatrick model used by TSA is a commonly-accepted training evaluation model endorsed by the Office of Personnel Management and used throughout the federal government. While TSA reported expected benefits of TSO Basic Training in its business case and implemented the Kirkpatrick model to begin assessing training, it has not yet identified specific goals that the program is expected to achieve, nor has it developed applicable performance measures to evaluate progress toward goals, as called for by leading management practices for training evaluation. TSA officials told GAO that TSO Basic Training is a relatively new program and they planned to collect more data on TSO screening performance before further evaluating the potential impacts of the training program. However, TSO Basic Training serves as the foundation for TSOs to learn core skills and procedures, and it is important to establish goals and measures to better assess the effectiveness of the training they receive. This will help TSA determine the extent to which TSOs are able to fulfill their important role in ensuring passenger safety while also showing results for the funds spent on such training each year.