

# GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-19-172](#), a report to congressional requesters

## Why GAO Did This Study

Since fiscal year 2002, DOT has awarded 401 SCASDP grants totaling approximately \$188 million to improve air service to small airports. GAO was asked to review DOT's award process and the effectiveness of recent grants.

This report, among other things, (1) examines the extent to which DOT's process for awarding fiscal year 2014–2016 grants (the most recent award cycles when GAO began its review) was consistent with its grant notices and recommended practices for awarding discretionary grants, and (2) examines the extent to which fiscal year 2010–2014 grants (the most recent award cycles for which most projects had been completed) assisted airports in improving their air service, and identifies factors that affect the success of grant projects. GAO reviewed program documentation; compared processes against internal documents and recommended practices that GAO identified in previous work; analyzed calendar year 2009–2019 airline and DOT data, conducted a correlation analysis; and interviewed DOT officials, and a judgmental sample of 36 grantee or applicant airports and 13 stakeholders in small community air service.

## What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that DOT clarify in its internal evaluation plan how reviewers should evaluate and rate applications. DOT agreed with the recommendation.

View [GAO-19-172](#). For more information, contact Heather Krause, 202-512-2834, [krauseh@gao.gov](mailto:krauseh@gao.gov).

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## SMALL COMMUNITY AIR SERVICE DEVELOPMENT

### Process for Awarding Grants Could Be Improved

## What GAO Found

Some aspects of the Department of Transportation's (DOT) process for evaluating fiscal year 2014–2016 grant applications for the Small Community Air Service Development Program (SCASDP) were inconsistent with its published grant notices, which communicate the process for potential applicants, and with its internal evaluation plan, which is used by reviewers to rate applications. In addition, DOT followed or partially followed recommended practices for awarding discretionary grants.

- **Grant notice and evaluation plan:** DOT's process for evaluating application eligibility and merit differed from the process described in its grant notices. For example, DOT's notice stated that it would use the criteria that airports have either insufficient air service or unreasonably high fares to determine whether an application is eligible for a grant, but in practice, DOT used these criteria to evaluate an application's merit. According to Office of Management and Budget guidance, the grant notice should make the application process transparent. In response to GAO's finding, DOT is revising its upcoming grant notice to clarify how it uses information submitted by applicants, which provides greater transparency of its process. Further, DOT's internal evaluation plan for reviewers described the selection criteria to consider, but did not provide clear guidance for evaluating and rating each application based on how it aligns with these criteria. DOT's financial award guidance calls for a clearly defined application evaluation process to enable reviewers to rate applications fairly and accurately. Clarifying its evaluation guidance could help ensure that reviewers consistently rate applications. DOT officials told GAO that they intend to revise the evaluation plan for the next grant cycle to address these issues, but as of March 2019, have not provided documentation that such changes are in progress.
- **Recommended practices:** DOT followed the practices of using a panel of reviewers with expertise to evaluate applications and also documenting its rationale for each award decision, including providing a written narrative describing the grant project and outlining how the project aligned with the selection criteria. However, while DOT notified applicants of award decisions through its grant award order, unsuccessful applicants GAO interviewed were not always aware that they could request feedback from DOT. In response to GAO's finding, DOT is adding information on the opportunity for feedback to its upcoming grant notice. This change should help make applicants aware of this opportunity and could help unsuccessful applicants determine whether to apply again, and if so, how to improve their applications.

Overall, GAO found that half of the 66 fiscal year 2010–2014 grant projects reviewed were successful in reaching their project goals, and over one-third sustained their air service improvements at least 24 months after their grant ended. GAO found that factors including community demand for air service, a strong or growing local economy, and airline support for a project were associated with project success; however, no single factor strongly correlated with project success.