

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-20-642](#), a report to congressional committees

Why GAO Did This Study

FAA supports the safety of the U.S. aviation system by ensuring air carriers, pilots, and other regulated entities comply with safety standards. In 2015, FAA announced a new enforcement policy with a more collaborative and problem-solving approach called the Compliance Program. Under the program, FAA emphasizes using compliance actions, for example, counseling or training, to address many violations more efficiently, according to FAA. Enforcement actions such as civil penalties are reserved for more serious violations, such as when a violation is reckless or intentional.

The FAA Reauthorization Act of 2018 included a provision that GAO review FAA's Compliance Program. This report examines (1) how FAA implemented and used the Compliance Program and (2) how FAA evaluates the effectiveness of the program. GAO analyzed FAA data on enforcement actions agency-wide and on compliance actions for three selected offices for fiscal years 2012 to 2019 (4 years before and after program start). GAO also reviewed FAA guidance and interviewed FAA officials, including those from the eight offices that oversee compliance with safety standards.

What GAO Recommends

GAO is making three recommendations including that FAA assign authority to oversee the Compliance Program and evaluate the effectiveness of the program in meeting goals. FAA concurred with the recommendations.

View [GAO-20-642](#). For more information, contact Heather Krause at (202) 512-2834 or krauseh@gao.gov.

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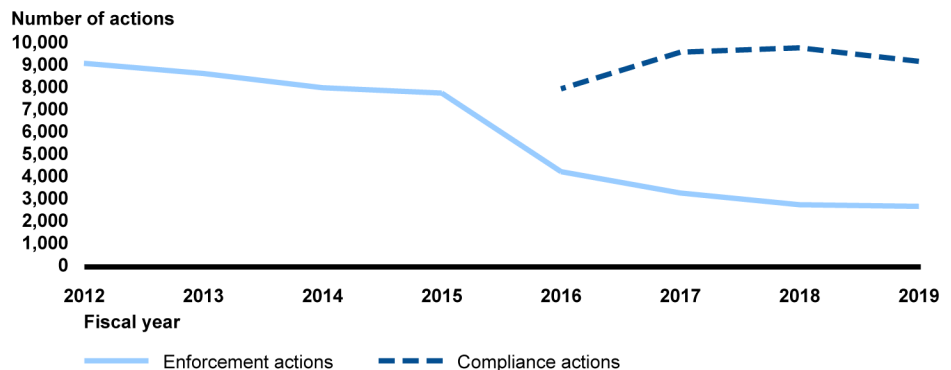
AVIATION SAFETY

Actions Needed to Evaluate Changes to FAA's Enforcement Policy on Safety Standards

What GAO Found

The Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) directed individual offices to implement the Compliance Program, and FAA has increasingly used compliance actions rather than enforcement actions to address violations of safety standards since starting the Compliance Program. FAA revised agency-wide guidance in September 2015 to emphasize using compliance actions, such as counseling or changes to policies. Compliance actions are to be used when a regulated entity is willing and able to comply and enforcement action is not required or warranted, e.g., for repeated violations, according to FAA guidance. FAA then directed its offices—for example, Flight Standards Service and Drug Abatement Division—to implement the Compliance Program as appropriate, given their different responsibilities and existing processes. Under the Compliance Program, data show that selected FAA offices have made increasing use of compliance actions.

Total Number of Federal Aviation Administration Enforcement Actions and Number of Compliance Actions Closed for Selected Program Offices, Fiscal Years 2012-2019



Sources: GAO analysis of FAA's Enforcement Information System, Program Tracking and Reporting Subsystem, Safety Assurance System, Certification and Compliance Management Information System, and Compliance and Enforcement Tracking System. | GAO-20-642

No specific FAA office or entity oversees the Compliance Program. FAA tasked a working group to lead some initial implementation efforts. However, the group no longer regularly discusses the Compliance Program, and no office or entity was then assigned oversight authority. As a result, FAA is not positioned to identify and share best practices or other valuable information across offices. FAA established goals for the Compliance Program—to promote the highest level of safety and compliance with standards and to foster an open, transparent exchange of data. FAA, however, has not taken steps to evaluate if or determine how the program accomplishes these goals. Key considerations for agency enforcement decisions state that an agency should establish an evaluation plan to determine if its enforcement policy achieves desired goals. Three of eight FAA offices have started to evaluate the effects of the Compliance Program, but two offices have not yet started. Three other offices do not plan to do so—in one case, because FAA has not told the office to. FAA officials generally believe the Compliance Program is achieving its safety goals based on examples of its use. However, without an evaluation, FAA will not know if the Compliance Program is improving safety or having other effects—intended or unintended.