

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-14-787T](#), a testimony before the Subcommittee on Transportation Security, Committee on Homeland Security, House of Representatives

Why GAO Did This Study

TSA maintains a federal workforce to screen passengers and baggage at the majority of the nation's commercial airports, but it also oversees a workforce of private screeners at airports who participate in the SPP. The SPP allows commercial airports to apply to have screening performed by private screeners, who are to provide a level of screening services and protection that equals or exceeds that of federal screeners.

This testimony addresses the extent to which TSA (1) provides guidance to airport operators for the SPP application process, (2) assesses and monitors the performance of private versus federal screeners, and (3) compares the costs of federal and private screeners. This statement is based on reports and a testimony GAO issued from January 2009 through January 2014.

What GAO Recommends

GAO has made several recommendations since 2009 to improve SPP operations and oversight, which GAO has since closed as implemented based on TSA actions to address them.

View [GAO-14-787T](#). For more information, contact Jennifer Grover at (202) 512-7141 or GroverJ@gao.gov.

July 2014

SCREENING PARTNERSHIP PROGRAM

TSA Has Improved Application Guidance and Monitoring of Screener Performance, and Continues to Improve Cost Comparison Methods

What GAO Found

Since GAO's December 2012 report on the Screening Partnership Program (SPP), the Transportation Security Administration (TSA) has developed guidance for airport operators applying to the SPP. In December 2012, GAO found that TSA had not provided guidance to airport operators on its SPP application and approval process, which had been revised to reflect statutory requirements. Further, airport operators GAO interviewed at the time identified difficulties in completing the revised application, such as obtaining cost information requested in the application. GAO recommended that TSA develop application guidance and TSA concurred. In December 2012, TSA updated its SPP website with general application guidance and a description of TSA's assessment criteria and process. The new guidance addresses the intent of GAO's recommendation.

TSA has also developed a mechanism to regularly monitor private versus federal screener performance. In December 2012, TSA officials stated that they planned to assess overall screener performance across all commercial airports instead of comparing the performance of SPP and non-SPP airports as they had done previously. Also in December 2012, GAO reported differences between the performance at SPP and non-SPP airports based on screener performance data. In addition, GAO reported that TSA's across-the-board mechanisms did not summarize information for the SPP as a whole or across years, making it difficult to identify changes in private screener performance. GAO concluded that monitoring and comparing private and federal screener performance were consistent with the statutory provision authorizing TSA to contract with private screening companies. As a result, GAO recommended that TSA develop a mechanism to regularly do so. TSA concurred with the recommendation and in January 2013, issued its *SPP Annual Report*, which provided an analysis of private versus federal screener performance. In September 2013, TSA provided internal guidance requiring that the report annually verify that the level of screening services and protection provided at SPP airports is equal to or greater than the level that would be provided by federal screeners. These actions address the intent of GAO's recommendation.

TSA has faced challenges in accurately comparing the costs of screening services at SPP and non-SPP airports. In 2007, TSA estimated that SPP airports cost about 17 percent more to operate than airports using federal screeners. In January 2009, GAO noted strengths in TSA's methodology, but also identified seven limitations that could affect the accuracy and reliability of cost comparisons. GAO recommended that TSA update its analysis to address the limitations. TSA generally concurred with the recommendation. In March 2011, TSA described efforts to address the limitations and a revised cost comparison estimating that SPP airports would cost 3 percent more to operate in 2011 than airports using federal screeners. In March 2011, GAO found that TSA had taken steps to address some of the limitations, but needed to take additional actions. In July 2014, TSA officials stated that they are continuing to make additional changes to the cost estimation methodology and GAO is continuing to monitor TSA's progress in this area through ongoing work.