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# TSA ACQUISITIONS

TSA Needs to Establish Metrics and Evaluate Third Party Testing Outcomes for Screening Technologies

Why GAO Did This Study

TSA relies on technologies like imaging systems and explosives detection systems to screen passengers and baggage to prevent prohibited items from getting on board commercial aircraft. As part of its process of acquiring these systems and deploying them to airports, TSA tests the systems to ensure they meet requirements.

The 2018 TSA Modernization Act contained a provision for GAO to review the third party testing program. GAO assessed the extent to which TSA (1) used third party testing, and (2) articulated its goals and developed metrics to measure the effects of third party testing.

GAO reviewed TSA's strategic plans, acquisition guidance, program documentation, and testing policies. GAO interviewed officials from TSA's Test and Evaluation Division and acquisition programs, as well as representatives of vendors producing security screening systems and companies providing third party testing services.

What GAO Recommends

GAO is recommending that TSA develop metrics to measure the effects of third party testing on efficiency, assess its effects on efficiency, and assess whether third party testing contributes to supplier diversity and innovation. DHS concurred with GAO's three recommendations and has actions planned to address them.

What GAO Found

In 2013, the Transportation Security Administration (TSA) introduced the concept of third party testing—having an independent testing entity verify that a security screening system meets certain requirements. The concept is that screening system vendors would take this additional step either prior to submitting their technologies to TSA or if their system failed TSA's test and evaluation process. The goal is for third party testing to reduce the time and resources that TSA spends on its own testing. However, since introduced, TSA has directed only three vendors that failed TSA tests to use third party testing, with varying outcomes. In two other cases, TSA supplemented its test capabilities by using third party testers to determine that systems installed at airports were working properly. TSA officials and industry representatives pointed to several reasons for third party testing's limited use since 2013, such as the cost to industry to use third party testers and TSA's reluctance to date to accept third party test data as an alternative to its own. Despite this, TSA officials told GAO they hope to use third party testing more in the future. For example, in recent announcements to evaluate and qualify new screening systems, TSA stated that it will require a system that fails TSA testing to go to a third party tester to address the identified issues (see figure).

Example of Use of Third Party Testing When a System Experiences a Failure in TSA's Testing
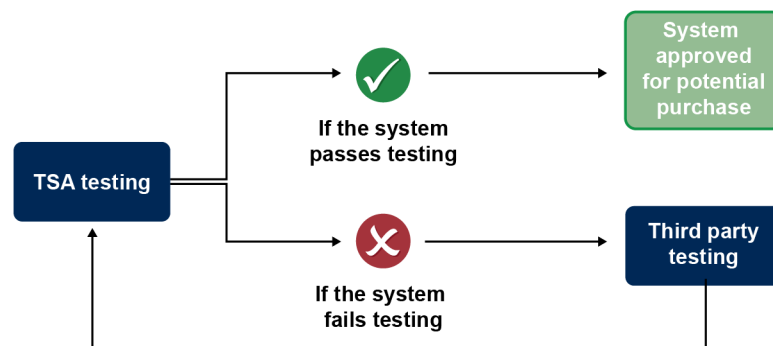
Source: GAO analysis of Transportation Security Administration (TSA) policy and guidance. | GAO-21-50

TSA set a goal in 2013 to increase screening technology testing efficiency. In addition, TSA reported to Congress in January 2020 that third party testing is a part of its efforts to increase supplier diversity and innovation. However, TSA has not established metrics to determine third party testing's contribution toward the goal of increasing efficiency. Further, GAO found no link between third party testing and supplier diversity and innovation. Some TSA officials and industry representatives also questioned third party testing's relevance to these efforts. Without metrics to measure and assess the extent to which third party testing increases testing efficiency, TSA will be unable to determine the value of this concept. Similarly, without assessing whether third party testing contributes to supplier diversity and innovation, TSA cannot know if third party testing activities are contributing to these goals as planned.

United States Government Accountability Office