



Testimony

Before the Subcommittee on
Transportation and Maritime Security,
Committee on Homeland Security,
House of Representatives

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FEDERAL AIR MARSHAL SERVICE

Recommendations to Address Organizational Performance and Workforce Challenges Largely Implemented

Statement of Tina Won Sherman, Director, Homeland
Security and Justice

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-24-107824](#), a testimony before the Subcommittee on Transportation and Maritime Security, Committee on Homeland Security, House of Representatives

Why GAO Did This Study

Twenty-three years after 9/11, the threat of terrorist attacks to civil aviation and the need for effective security measures remains of significant concern. FAMS deploys air marshals on selected flights to deter and address such threats. In June 2023, FAMS issued a roadmap that describes the mission, vision, and priorities of the agency.

This statement discusses GAO's portfolio of work on FAMS and its progress addressing prior GAO recommendations.

This statement is based on prior GAO reports published from May 2016 through June 2021, along with updates on FAMS's efforts to address previous GAO recommendations. For these reports, GAO reviewed TSA and FAMS documentation, analyzed data, and interviewed agency officials. For recommendation updates, GAO reviewed FAMS and TSA documentation and met with officials.

What GAO Recommends

GAO made 20 recommendations related to FAMS in the reports covered by this statement. DHS agreed with all of them. As of August 2024, 17 have been implemented; one has been partially implemented; two have been closed—no longer valid. GAO will continue to monitor the agency's progress.

View [GAO-24-107824](#). For more information, contact Tina Won Sherman at (202) 512-8461 or ShermanT@gao.gov.

September 24, 2024

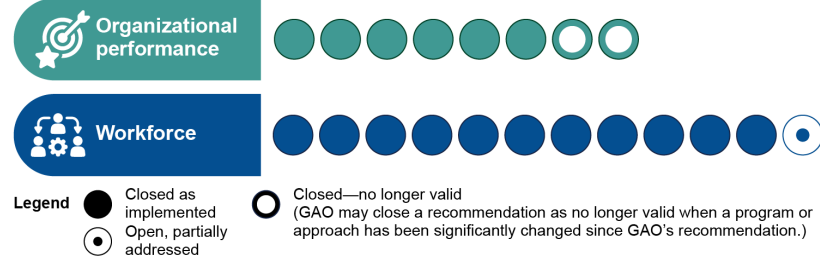
FEDERAL AIR MARSHAL SERVICE

Recommendations to Address Organizational Performance and Workforce Challenges Largely Implemented

What GAO Found

The Federal Air Marshal Service (FAMS) is a component within the Department of Homeland Security's (DHS) Transportation Security Administration (TSA). In prior work, GAO identified various challenges affecting FAMS. These generally fall into two areas: (1) organizational performance and (2) workforce management. As of August 2024, FAMS and TSA have largely implemented GAO's 20 recommendations.

Summary Status of GAO Recommendations to the Federal Air Marshal Service from Calendar Years 2016-2021, by Type of Challenge and Status, as of August 2024



Source: GAO analysis; Icons-Studio/stock.adobe.com (icons). | GAO-24-107824

One example of a closed recommendation to address organizational performance relates to the effectiveness of TSA's aviation security countermeasures. In 2017, GAO reported on the costs and effectiveness of TSA's passenger aviation security countermeasures, including FAMS. GAO found that TSA did not have methods to assess its effectiveness in deterring attacks on the U.S. aviation system. As a result, GAO recommended that TSA explore and pursue methods to do so. TSA addressed this by commissioning several studies and using them to inform leadership decisions about new or revised countermeasures. As a result, TSA should now be better positioned to understand and improve its efforts to deter attacks on the U.S. aviation system.

The open, partially addressed, recommendation to address workforce management challenges focuses on FAMS's tracking of the time its air marshals spent on and off their shifts. In 2020, GAO found that FAMS did not monitor air marshals' work hours against its guidelines for shift lengths and rest periods. GAO recommended that FAMS monitor the extent to which air marshals' actual shifts and rest hours are consistent with scheduling guidelines. As of August 2024, FAMS developed reports with this information, but it had not used them to help manage its workforce.

Chairman Gimenez, Ranking Member Thanedar, and Members of the Subcommittee:

I am pleased to be here today to discuss our work on the Federal Air Marshal Service (FAMS)—a component within the Department of Homeland Security’s (DHS) Transportation Security Administration (TSA). FAMS’s stated mission is to detect, deter, and defeat criminal, terrorist, and hostile activities that target our nation’s transportation systems.

In the 23 years since the attacks of September 11, 2001, TSA has spent billions on a wide range of programs designed to enhance aviation security.¹ For example, FAMS deploys armed federal law enforcement officers—air marshals—to provide an onboard security presence on selected flights of U.S. air carriers traveling domestically and around the world. To cover as many flights as possible, FAMS has a deployment strategy that involves identifying flights and determining how to divide resources between in-flight and ground-based security.

To effectively carry out its work, FAMS must continually ensure alignment between its core mission and the resources necessary to achieve it. In June 2023, FAMS issued a roadmap that, in part, describes the mission, vision, and priorities of the agency.²

My statement today discusses GAO’s portfolio of work on FAMS and its progress addressing our recommendations. This statement is based on prior GAO reports published from May 2016 through June 2021, along with selected updates on FAMS’s efforts to address previous GAO recommendations.³ For these reports, GAO reviewed FAMS documentation, analyzed data, and interviewed agency officials. For

¹In fiscal year 2023, FAMS’s total appropriation was \$735 million and for fiscal year 2025, FAMS has requested \$843 million.

²Transportation Security Administration, *Law Enforcement/Federal Air Marshal Service Roadmap*, (June 2023).

³GAO, *COVID-19: Federal Air Marshal Service Should Document Its Response to Cases and Facilitate Access to Testing*, [GAO-21-595](#) (Washington, D.C.: June 23, 2021); *Aviation Security: Federal Air Marshal Service Has Taken Steps to Address Workforce Issues, but Additional Actions Needed*, [GAO-20-125](#) (Washington, D.C.: Feb. 12, 2020); *Aviation Security: Actions Needed to Systematically Evaluate Cost and Effectiveness Across Security Countermeasures*, [GAO-17-794](#) (Washington, D.C.: Sept. 11, 2017); *Federal Air Marshal Service: Actions Needed to Better Incorporate Risk in Deployment Strategy*, [GAO-16-582](#) (Washington, D.C.: May 31, 2016); and *Federal Air Marshal Service: Additional Actions Needed to Ensure Air Marshals’ Mission Readiness*, [GAO-16-764](#) (Washington, D.C., Sept. 14, 2016).

recommendation updates, we reviewed FAMS and TSA documentation and met with FAMS and TSA officials.

More detailed information on the objectives, scope, and methodologies of our prior work can be found in each of the reports listed at the end of this statement. We conducted the work on which this statement is based in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards. Those standards require that we plan and perform the audit to obtain sufficient, appropriate evidence to provide a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives. We believe that the evidence obtained provides a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives.

FAMS and TSA Have Largely Implemented GAO's Recommendations

Since 2016, we have made 20 recommendations to address various challenges affecting FAMS. These generally fall into two areas: (1) organizational performance and (2) workforce management.⁴ As of August 2024, FAMS and TSA have largely implemented our recommendations. As figure 1 illustrates, 17 have been implemented, one has been partially implemented, and two have been closed as no longer valid.⁵

⁴Managing organizational performance can include efforts to measure and assess performance. Managing the workforce can include efforts to acquire, develop, and retain staff.

⁵GAO may close a recommendation as no longer valid when a program or approach has been significantly changed since GAO's recommendation. GAO continues to monitor FAMS's progress in implementation.

Figure 1: GAO Recommendations to the Federal Air Marshal Service (FAMS) from Calendar Years 2016-2021, Categorized by Area and Status, as of August 2024

GAO report area and year	Recommendation summary	Status
Risk-based deployment^a 2016	Incorporate risk into method for initially setting annual target numbers of average daily international and domestic flights to cover.	
	Conduct and document a risk assessment to further support FAMS's domestic resource allocation decisions, including the identification of high-priority geographic areas.	
	Document the rationale for FAMS's selection of international destinations for air marshal deployment and the proportion of flights to cover at each destination.	
	Adopt a consistent name and definition for the performance measure referred to as the TSA coverage score that accurately reflects its calculation method and composite nature.	
	Report the performance results for each of the subcategories that comprise the TSA coverage score to FAMS and TSA leadership.	
Mission readiness^b 2016	Regularly collect and incorporate incumbent air marshals' feedback on the training they receive from field office programs.	
	Improve the response rates of the training surveys it conducts.	
	Specify in policy who at the headquarters level has oversight responsibility for ensuring that field office Supervisory Air Marshals-in-Charge or their designees meet their responsibilities for ensuring that training completion records are entered in a timely manner.	
	Specify in policy who at the headquarters level is responsible for ensuring that headquarters personnel enter approved air marshals' training exemptions into the Federal Air Marshal Information System, and define the time frame for doing so.	
	Determine whether incumbent air marshals continue to be mission ready in key skills.	
Cost and effectiveness across security countermeasures^c 2017	Assess the deterrent effect of TSA's passenger aviation security countermeasures; such an effort should identify FAMS as a top priority to address.	
	Evaluate the potential cost and effectiveness trade-offs across countermeasures.	
Workforce management^d 2020	Identify and utilize a suitable system that provides information about air marshals' medical qualification status.	
	Assess the health and fitness of the FAMS workforce as a whole, including trends over time.	
	Monitor the extent to which air marshals' actual shifts and rest hours are consistent with scheduling guidelines.	
	Provide all air marshals access to scheduling guidelines, including workday length and rest periods.	
	Provide supervisory air marshals access to guidance that outlines authorities and procedures for changing an air marshal's work schedule.	
	Reaffirm and strengthen efforts to prevent discrimination.	
COVID-19 protocols^e 2021	Document steps taken to implement agency protocols following identification of employees with COVID-19.	
	Routinely facilitate employee access to COVID-19 testing.	

Legend **Organizational performance challenge** Closed as implemented Closed—no longer valid^f TSA Transportation Security Administration
Workforce challenge Closed as implemented Open, partially addressed

Source: GAO analysis. | GAO-24-107824

^aFederal Air Marshal Service: Actions Needed to Better Incorporate Risk in Deployment Strategy, GAO-16-582 (Washington, D.C.: May 31, 2016).

^b*Federal Air Marshal Service: Additional Actions Needed to Ensure Air Marshals' Mission Readiness*, [GAO-16-764](#) (Washington D.C.: Sept. 14, 2016).

^c*Aviation Security: Actions Needed to Systematically Evaluate Cost and Effectiveness Across Security Countermeasures*, [GAO-17-794](#) (Washington, D.C.: Sept. 11, 2017).

^d*Aviation Security: Federal Air Marshal Service Has Taken Steps to Address Workforce Issues, but Additional Actions Needed* [GAO-20-125](#) (Washington, D.C.: Feb. 12, 2020).

^e*COVID-19: Federal Air Marshal Service Should Document Its Response to Cases and Facilitate Access to Testing*, [GAO-21-595](#) (Washington, D.C.: June 23, 2021)

^fGAO may close a recommendation as no longer valid when a program or approach has been significantly changed since GAO's recommendation.

Actions to Better Manage FAMS Organizational Performance

With respect to the eight recommendations we made concerning organizational performance challenges, FAMS and TSA have implemented six but did not implement the remaining two. Examples of actions taken in response to our recommendations include:

- **FAMS took action to report comprehensively on performance categories.** In May 2016, we reported on the performance information FAMS shared with TSA and DHS. We found that the performance measure FAMS used to assess the extent to which it met its flight coverage and resource use targets was not clear or objective.⁶ This measure—the TSA coverage score—was a composite score for 11 performance categories, including air marshal coverage of certain domestic and international flights.⁷ The measure lacked clarity because, for example, it aggregated flight coverage and resource allocation information, which made it difficult to interpret. It also lacked objectivity because, as a composite measure, it did not show performance below or above desired levels in the 11 categories—information that would aid decision making. As a result, we recommended that FAMS report the performance results for each of the 11 categories that comprise the TSA coverage score to FAMS and TSA leadership.

In 2017, FAMS began reporting the more complete information to both FAMS and TSA leadership on a regular basis.⁸ As a result, DHS, TSA, and FAMS leadership had more complete information about FAMS performance, including where FAMS performance was below targets. We therefore closed this recommendation as implemented.

⁶[GAO-16-582](#).

⁷Further detail about these categories has been designated sensitive security information and thus cannot be included in a public testimony.

⁸FAMS now refers to this as the “Composite Index of Federal Air Marshal Service Risk-Based Flight Coverage Goals.”

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- **TSA took action to assess the deterrent effect of countermeasures.** In September 2017, we reported on the costs and effectiveness of TSA’s passenger aviation security countermeasures, including FAMS.⁹ We found that TSA did not have methods to assess its effectiveness in deterring attacks on the U.S. aviation system. As a result, we recommended that TSA explore and pursue methods to assess the deterrent effect of TSA’s passenger aviation security countermeasures.

TSA addressed this recommendation by commissioning several studies. For example, TSA studied threat shifting—the response of an adversary to its perception of countermeasures or procedures—as a means to understand and influence deterrence. TSA officials explained that they used the studies’ results to inform leadership decisions about new or revised countermeasures. By pursuing these methods, TSA could better understand and improve its efforts to deter attacks on the U.S. aviation system. We closed this recommendation as implemented.

- **FAMS has not set annual targets for its coverage of domestic and international flights.** In our May 2016 report, mentioned above, we found FAMS could better incorporate risk in its deployment strategy.¹⁰ For example, we found that FAMS did not consider risk when deciding how to initially divide annual resources between domestic and international flights to achieve its mission priorities. With this approach, FAMS attempted to maximize the total number of flights it could cover, but because this model did not account for risk, FAMS could not ensure it is devoting its resources to the highest risk flights overall. As a result, we recommended that FAMS incorporate risk into its method for initially setting annual target numbers of average daily international and domestic flights to cover.

In March 2018, FAMS revised its deployment methodology to no longer set these annual targets. We closed this recommendation as no longer valid. In November 2020, agency officials said that FAMS was evaluating its concept of operations and planned to make further adjustments to their deployment strategy.

Actions to Better Manage the FAMS Workforce

With respect to the 12 recommendations we made concerning workforce management challenges, FAMS and TSA have implemented 11 and FAMS is making progress in implementing the remaining

⁹GAO-17-794.

¹⁰GAO-16-582.

recommendation. Examples of actions taken in response to our recommendations include:

- **FAMS took action to assess the health and fitness of its workforce.** In February 2020, we assessed FAMS’s workforce issues, including air marshals’ quality of life.¹¹ We found that although FAMS had assessed individuals’ health, such as by requiring medical exams, the agency had not comprehensively assessed the health of its workforce as a whole—a step that would enable it to look for broader health trends and risks. As a result, we recommended that FAMS develop and implement a plan to assess the health and fitness of the FAMS workforce.

In October 2022, FAMS began tracking injuries among the workforce, including the number, type, and geographic location of individuals with injuries. With this information, FAMS management can better ensure its workforce can fulfill its national security mission. We closed this recommendation as implemented.

- **FAMS took action to facilitate employee access to COVID-19 testing:** In June 2021, we reported on FAMS’s response to COVID-19.¹² We found that air marshals faced barriers getting tested for COVID-19 and FAMS had not been routinely facilitating employee access to such testing. As a result, we recommended that FAMS routinely facilitate employee access to COVID-19 testing.

In March 2022, FAMS began making COVID-19 tests available to employees. By routinely facilitating employee access to testing, FAMS helped employees better ensure their health, the health of others, and FAMS’s continued security operations. We closed this recommendation as implemented.

- **FAMS has taken some action toward monitoring air marshals’ work hours against scheduling guidelines.** In our February 2020 report we found that FAMS did not monitor air marshals’ actual shifts and rest periods against FAMS’s scheduling guidelines.¹³ As a result, we recommended that FAMS do so.

¹¹[GAO-20-125](#).

¹²[GAO-21-595](#).

¹³[GAO-20-125](#). At the time of our review, FAMS’s guidelines identified a 10-hour maximum for domestic work shifts. In certain circumstances, however, air marshals could be scheduled to work longer than 10 hours. In addition, FAMS’s guidelines identified a 16-hour minimum rest following domestic flights exceeding 8 hours of flight time and a 12-hour minimum rest following domestic flights lasting 8 hours of flight time or less.

As of August 2024, FAMS has developed a standard report describing the extent to which air marshals' actual work and rest hours were consistent with the guidelines. However, FAMS has not produced the report regularly and provided it to leadership. According to agency officials, FAMS plans to implement the report before the end of 2024. To fully address this recommendation, FAMS will need to use this report to understand the extent to which air marshals' actual work hours are consistent with the guidelines. We consider this recommendation open-partially implemented and will continue to monitor FAMS's progress.

In conclusion, protection of our nation's civil aviation system amidst evolving threats is critical to overall transportation security. Our prior recommendations prompted FAMS's and TSA's actions to address organizational performance and workforce management challenges. We stand ready to support future congressional oversight.

Chairman Gimenez, Ranking Member Thanedar, and Members of the Subcommittee, this completes my prepared statement. I would be pleased to respond to any questions that you may have at this time.

GAO Contacts and Staff Acknowledgements

If you or your staff have any questions about this testimony, please contact Tina Won Sherman, Director, Homeland Security and Justice at (202) 512-8461 or shermant@gao.gov. Contact points for our Offices of Congressional Relations and Public Affairs may be found on the last page of this statement. GAO staff who made key contributions to this statement are Joy A. Booth (Assistant Director) and Anne A. Akin (Analyst-in-Charge). Additional staff who made contributions to this statement include Claudia Becker, Michele Fejfar, and Mary Turgeon. Other staff who made key contributions to the reports cited in the testimony are identified in the source products.

Related GAO Products

COVID-19: Federal Air Marshal Service Should Document Its Response to Cases and Facilitate Access to Testing, [GAO-21-595](#) (Washington, D.C.: June 23, 2021).

Aviation Security: Federal Air Marshal Service Has Taken Steps to Address Workforce Issues, but Additional Actions Needed, [GAO-20-125](#) (Washington, D.C.: Feb. 12, 2020).

Aviation Security: Actions Needed to Systematically Evaluate Cost and Effectiveness Across Security Countermeasures, [GAO-17-794](#) (Washington, D.C.: Sept. 11, 2017).

Federal Air Marshal Service: Additional Actions Needed to Ensure Air Marshals' Mission Readiness, [GAO-16-764](#) (Washington D.C.: Sept. 14, 2016).

Federal Air Marshal Service: Actions Needed to Better Incorporate Risk in Deployment Strategy, [GAO-16-582](#) (Washington, D.C.: May 31, 2016).

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