

## Why GAO Did This Study

Although transit service is generally safe, recent high-profile accidents on several large rail transit systems—notably the June 2009 collision in Washington, D.C., that resulted in nine fatalities and 52 injuries—have raised concerns. The Federal Transit Administration (FTA) oversees state agencies that directly oversee rail transit agencies' safety practices. FTA also provides assistance to transit agencies, such as funding and training, to enhance safety. GAO was asked to determine (1) the challenges the largest rail transit systems face in ensuring safety and (2) the extent to which assistance provided by FTA addresses these challenges. GAO visited eight large rail transit systems and their respective state oversight agencies, reviewed pertinent documents, and interviewed rail transit safety experts and officials from FTA and the National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB).

## What GAO Recommends

To guide and track the performance of FTA's rail transit safety efforts, DOT should direct FTA to use leading practices to set clear and specific goals and measures for these efforts. DOT and NTSB reviewed a draft of this report and provided technical comments and clarifications, which we incorporated as appropriate. DOT agreed to consider the recommendation.

## RAIL TRANSIT

### FTA Programs Are Helping Address Transit Agencies' Safety Challenges, but Improved Performance Goals and Measures Could Better Focus Efforts

## What GAO Found

The largest rail transit agencies face several challenges in trying to ensure safety on their systems. First, according to some experts we interviewed, the level of safety culture—awareness of and organizational commitment to the importance of safety—varies across the transit industry and is low in some agencies. NTSB found that the lack of a safety culture contributed to the June 2009 fatal transit accident in Washington, D.C. Second, with many employees nearing retirement age, large transit agencies have found it difficult to recruit and hire qualified staff. It is also challenging for them to ensure that employees receive needed safety training because of financial constraints and the limited availability of technical training. Training helps ensure safe operations; NTSB has identified employee errors, such as not following procedures, as a probable cause in some significant rail transit accidents. Third, more than a third of the largest agencies' assets are in poor or marginal condition. While agencies have prioritized investments to ensure safety, delays in repairing some assets, such as signal systems, can pose safety risks. The transit industry has been slow to adopt asset management practices that can help agencies set investment priorities and better ensure safety.

FTA has provided various types of assistance to transit agencies to help them address these challenges, including researching how to instill a strong safety culture at transit agencies, supporting a variety of safety-related training classes for transit agency staff, and providing funding to help agencies achieve a state of good repair. The Department of Transportation (DOT) has proposed legislation that would give FTA the authority to set and enforce rail transit safety standards, which could help improve safety culture in the industry. FTA is also planning improvements to its training program and the development of asset management guidance for transit agencies, among other things. Some legislative proposals, studies, experts, and agency officials have identified further steps that FTA could take to address transit agencies' safety challenges, such as requiring transit agencies to implement asset management practices. Some of these suggested further steps may have the potential, if implemented, to enhance rail transit safety. DOT is currently developing a legislative proposal for reauthorizing surface transportation programs and may include new rail transit safety initiatives in this proposal. In addition, clear and specific performance goals and measures could help FTA target its efforts to improve transit safety and track results. GAO has identified leading practices to establish such performance goals and measures, but FTA has not fully adopted these practices. For example, FTA has not identified specific performance goals that make clear the direct results its safety activities are trying to achieve and related measures that would enable the agency to track and demonstrate its progress in achieving those results. Without such specific goals and measures, it is not clear how FTA's safety activities contribute toward DOT's strategic goal of reducing transportation-related injuries and fatalities, including rail transit injuries and fatalities. Furthermore, problems with FTA's rail transit safety data could hamper the agency's ability to track its performance. GAO is making recommendations for improving these data in a separate report ([GAO-11-217R](#)).