



United States Government Accountability Office

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Report to Subcommittee on Government Operations and Border Management, Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs, U.S. Senate

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February 2024

# AVIATION SECURITY

## Transportation Security

## Administration Could Further Improve Officer Engagement

Accessible Version

# GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-24-106052](#), a report to Subcommittee on Government Operations and Border Management, Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs, U.S. Senate

## Why GAO Did This Study

TSA employs almost 50,000 TSOs who screen passengers and their baggage at U.S. airports. TSA employees' engagement has historically ranked among the lowest within the Department of Homeland Security and across the federal government.

GAO was asked to review the factors that affect TSO engagement and TSA's actions to improve it. This report examines (1) the key drivers that affect engagement and (2) the extent to which TSA has taken actions to address them.

GAO analyzed the Office of Personnel Management's Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey results from 2020 through 2023, reviewed agency guidance and documentation on TSA's actions to improve engagement, and interviewed human capital officials. GAO interviewed a nongeneralizable sample of TSOs, their supervisors, and senior leaders at five airports selected to capture variation in levels of employee engagement. GAO also interviewed five employee groups, including the union that represents TSOs.

## What GAO Recommends

GAO is making nine recommendations, including that TSA analyze the root causes of key drivers of low TSO engagement, such as opportunities for career development and work-life balance, and identify and implement actions to address them. DHS concurred with the recommendations.

View [GAO-24-106052](#). For more information, contact Tina Won Sherman at (202) 512-8461 or [Shermant@gao.gov](mailto:Shermant@gao.gov).

February 2024

## AVIATION SECURITY

# Transportation Security Administration Could Further Improve Officer Engagement

## What GAO Found

Leadership of the Transportation Security Administration (TSA) has identified the need to improve employee engagement—their sense of purpose in their job—as central to the agency's security mission. According to the Office of Personnel Management, engaged employees are more innovative, productive, and committed in their jobs, and thus less likely to leave. GAO found that five key drivers affect the engagement of TSA's Transportation Security Officers (TSO), who comprise the majority of TSA employees.



Source: GAO analysis of Transportation Security Administration and Office of Personnel Management information; Icons-Studio/stock.adobe.com. | GAO-24-106052

### Five key drivers affect the engagement of TSA's Transportation Security Officers

Managing and recognizing performance

Providing opportunities for career development

Supporting work-life balance

Demonstrating responsiveness to input

Ensuring communication from management

Source: GAO analysis of Transportation Security Administration and Office of Personnel Management information; Icons-Studio/stock.adobe.com. | GAO-24-106052

TSA has taken actions to address all five key drivers. However, challenges related to each persist. For example, to address TSO concerns with managing and recognizing performance, TSA began requiring supervisors to take a 1-hour performance management course in 2018. In 2021, it set up two programs to reward top performance. However, these actions did not fully address the root causes of TSO dissatisfaction—namely, inconsistent management of TSOs' performance. By identifying and implementing actions that fully address the root causes of the driver, TSA will be better able to improve engagement. Further, TSA has not identified root causes of TSO dissatisfaction for three other drivers—career development, work-life balance, and communication. Without doing so, TSA will have difficulty implementing effective corrective actions that address the specific challenges for each of the drivers.

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## Transportation Security Officers Gather for a Shift Briefing



Source: GAO. | GAO-24-106052

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## Accessible Text for Transportation Security Officers Gather for a Shift Briefing

### Uniformed employees participating in indoor meeting

Source: GAO. | GAO-24-106052

For the final driver—demonstrating responsiveness to input—TSA has solicited TSO input on the root causes of low engagement at airports through a survey and other initiatives. However, TSA has not tracked follow-through on these initiatives. By tracking and monitoring follow-through on planned steps, TSA would be better able to ensure implementation and realize the desired effect of improving TSO engagement.

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# Contents

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GAO Highlights		ii
	<b>Why GAO Did This Study</b>	ii
	<b>What GAO Recommends</b>	ii
	<b>What GAO Found</b>	ii
Letter		1
	Background	5
	Five Key Drivers Affect TSO Engagement	14
	TSA Has Taken Actions to Address Key Drivers of Employee Engagement but Has Not Fully Addressed Root Causes of TSO Dissatisfaction	22
	Conclusion	41
	Recommendations for Executive Action	41
	Agency Comments and Our Evaluation	42
Appendix I: Objective, Scope, and Methodology		46
Appendix II: Analysis of the Drivers of Transportation Security Officer Engagement		50
Appendix III: Results of GAO’s Analysis of the Drivers of Transportation Security Officer Employee Engagement		55
Appendix IV: Transportation Security Administration’s Performance Goals, Measures, and Results for Improving Employee Engagement		59
Appendix V: Additional Transportation Security Administration Actions to Improve Employee Engagement		66
Appendix VI: Comments from the Department of Homeland Security		72
Accessible Text for Appendix VI: Comments from the Department of Homeland Security		79
Appendix VII: GAO Contact and Staff Acknowledgments		86
	GAO Contact	86
	Staff Acknowledgments	86
Tables		
	Table 1: 2022 Federal Employment Viewpoint Survey Questions Included in GAO’s Regression Model	52
	Table 2: Regression Results for Transportation Security Officers	56

---

## Figures

Transportation Security Officers Gather for a Shift Briefing	iii
Accessible Text for Transportation Security Officers Gather for a Shift Briefing	iii
Figure 1: Transportation Security Officers Screening Passengers at Ronald Reagan Washington National Airport in December 2022	6
Accessible Text for Figure 1: Transportation Security Officers Screening Passengers at Ronald Reagan Washington National Airport in December 2022	6
Figure 2: Transportation Security Administration (TSA) Employee Engagement Index Scores, 2017–2023	9
Accessible Data for Figure 2: Transportation Security Administration (TSA) Employee Engagement Index Scores, 2017–2023	9
Figure 3: Transportation Security Administration’s (TSA) 2021 Employee Engagement Action Plan	11
Accessible Text for Figure 3: Transportation Security Administration’s (TSA) 2021 Employee Engagement Action Plan	11
Figure 4: Example of Local Action Planning Process at Akron-Canton Airport in January 2023	13
Accessible Text for Figure 4: Example of Local Action Planning Process at Akron-Canton Airport in January 2023	13
Figure 5: Transportation Security Officers Gather for a Shift Briefing at a Los Angeles International Airport Security Checkpoint in February 2023	22
Accessible Text for Figure 5: Transportation Security Officers Gather for a Shift Briefing at a Los Angeles International Airport Security Checkpoint in February 2023	22
Figure 6: Transportation Security Officers TSA Estimated It Needed and On-Board, Fiscal Years 2020–2023	30
Accessible Data for Figure 6: Transportation Security Officers TSA Estimated It Needed and On-Board, Fiscal Years 2020–2023	31
Figure 7: Computers for Transportation Security Officers Near the Passenger Screening Checkpoint at Akron-Canton Airport	39
Accessible Text for Figure 7: Computers for Transportation Security Officers Near the Passenger Screening Checkpoint at Akron-Canton Airport	39
Figure 8: TSA’s Performance Goal, Measures, and Results for Improving Leadership from 2020 through 2023	61

---

Accessible Data for Figure 8: TSA's Performance Goal, Measures, and Results for Improving Leadership from 2020 through 2023	61
Figure 9: TSA's Performance Goal, Measure, and Results for Improving Compensation from 2020 through 2023	63
Accessible Data for Figure 9: TSA's Performance Goal, Measure, and Results for Improving Compensation from 2020 through 2023	63
Figure 10: TSA's Performance Goal, Measure, and Results for Building Accountability from 2020 through 2023	64
Accessible Data for Figure 10: TSA's Performance Goal, Measure, and Results for Building Accountability from 2020 through 2023	64

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**Abbreviations**

DHS	Department of Homeland Security
EEAP	Employee Engagement Action Plan
EI	Employee Engagement Index
FEVS	Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey
OPM	Office of Personnel Management
TSA	Transportation Security Administration
TSO	Transportation Security Officer

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February 27, 2024

The Honorable Kyrsten Sinema  
Chair  
The Honorable James Lankford  
Ranking Member  
Subcommittee on Government Operations and Border Management  
Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs  
United States Senate

The Transportation Security Administration (TSA), within the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), employs almost 50,000 Transportation Security Officers (TSO) who screen over 2 million passengers and their baggage each day at nearly 440 U.S. airports. These officers comprise about 81 percent of TSA's workforce and play an important role in keeping prohibited and potentially dangerous items off airplanes. TSA's 2018–2026 strategy states that its most important assets are the dedicated professionals securing the nation's transportation system.<sup>1</sup>

Employee engagement—an employee's sense of purpose in their job—is one component of employee morale.<sup>2</sup> According to the Office of Personnel Management (OPM), engagement is evident in an employee's display of dedication, persistence, and effort in their work or overall attachment to their organization and its mission. Engagement is important because employees who are engaged are more innovative, productive, committed to their job, and less likely to leave.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>TSA, *TSA Strategy 2018-2026*.

<sup>2</sup>In our prior work reviewing DHS morale, we have looked at employee morale in terms of both employee engagement and satisfaction. See GAO, *Department of Homeland Security: Employee Morale Survey Scores Highlight Progress and Continued Challenges*, [GAO-20-349T](#) (Washington, D.C.: Jan. 14, 2020). Also see GAO, *Department of Homeland Security: Taking Further Action to Better Determine Causes of Morale Problems Would Assist in Targeting Action Plans*, [GAO-12-940](#) (Washington, D.C.: Sept. 28, 2012).

<sup>3</sup>GAO, *Federal Workforce: Key Talent Management Strategies for Agencies to Better Meet Their Missions*, [GAO-19-181](#) (Washington, D.C.: Mar. 2019).

In 2021, we reported on the key drivers of DHS employee engagement and department-wide initiatives to improve it.<sup>4</sup> We found that DHS components, including TSA, had developed action plans for improving employee engagement. However, DHS had not issued written guidance on action planning, and components did not consistently include key elements in their plans, such as outcome-based performance measures. We recommended that DHS issue such guidance, which DHS then did in March 2021.<sup>5</sup>

TSA ranked 427 out of 432 subcomponent agencies in the federal government in the Partnership for Public Service’s “Best Places to Work” rankings in 2022.<sup>6</sup> TSA employees’ engagement improved from 2022 to 2023, according to data DHS provided. However, TSA continues to rank among the lowest within DHS and across the federal government.

TSA leadership has identified the need to improve TSO engagement as central to their security mission, and the agency’s strategy includes “commit to our people” among its top three priorities.<sup>7</sup> TSA also implemented a pay raise in July 2023 after Congress passed the

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<sup>4</sup>GAO, *DHS Employee Morale: Some Improvements Made, but Additional Actions Needed to Strengthen Employee Engagement*, [GAO-21-204](#), (Washington, D.C.: Jan. 12, 2021).

<sup>5</sup>We also found that DHS did not monitor the implementation and results of the component action planning process or provide feedback. We recommended that DHS do so, and the department agreed. DHS and its components have taken steps to address these recommendations, as of November 2023. To fully address our recommendations, all components will need to incorporate DHS’s feedback on their plans and review and assess their results.

<sup>6</sup>Rankings for 2022 were the most recent available at the time of our review; rankings for 2023 were not available as of December 2023. The Partnership for Public Service and the Boston Consulting Group publish the Best Places to Work ranking annually. The ranking uses OPM’s Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey results to determine how federal employees view their job and workplace. Since 2005, when the Partnership began including DHS in its rankings, TSA’s *engagement and satisfaction index* scores have been consistently lower than DHS’s, and DHS’s scores have been consistently lower than federal government-wide scores.

<sup>7</sup>TSA, *TSA Strategy 2018-2026*. This strategy identifies 3 priorities: improve security and safeguard the transportation system, accelerate action, and commit to its people. See also TSA, *Administrator’s Intent 3.0* (July 2023).



Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2023, which also provided funding for personnel system changes and new hiring.<sup>8</sup>

You asked us to review the factors that affect TSO engagement and TSA's actions to improve it. This report examines (1) the key drivers that affect TSO engagement and (2) the extent to which TSA has taken actions to address key drivers of TSO engagement.

To address our first objective, we conducted a regression analysis of OPM's 2022 Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey (FEVS) record-level results for TSOs—the most recent data available at the time we conducted our analysis.<sup>9</sup> We used this regression analysis to test which survey questions were most strongly associated with an individual officer's Employee Engagement Index (EEI) score, after controlling for other factors such as demographics.

To assess the reliability of the FEVS data, we conducted tests to identify errors and missing data, reviewed OPM documentation, and interviewed OPM officials knowledgeable about the survey data. We determined that the data were sufficiently reliable for the purposes of identifying the key drivers of employee engagement for TSOs.

We used the results of our regression analysis to identify the top issues driving TSO engagement. We then considered these top issues (identified in FEVS questions) in light of other information we gathered, notably our interviews with TSOs and employee groups, to identify key drivers of TSO engagement.<sup>10</sup>

We interviewed a nongeneralizable sample of TSOs, Lead TSOs, Supervisory TSOs, managers, and senior leaders at five airports between

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<sup>8</sup>Pub. L. No. 117-328, Div. F, Tit. II, 136 Stat. 4459, 4731; Explanatory Statement Regarding the Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2023, 168 Cong. Rec. S8562-S8563 (daily ed. Dec. 20, 2022).

<sup>9</sup>Regression analysis is a statistical method for estimating the relationship between different variables. For a detailed description of our regression analysis methodology, see appendix II. By record-level, we mean that we analyzed the anonymized individual survey responses for all the 14,223 TSOs who completed the 2022 survey. (43,271 TSOs received the survey.) The response rate for TSOs was approximately 33 percent. We obtained 2023 survey results for DHS and TSA in October 2023, but the record-level results were not available to us as of December 2023.

<sup>10</sup>For additional information about how we identified the key drivers and the results of our analysis, see appendices II and III.

December 2022 and April 2023.<sup>11</sup> To capture broader employee perspectives, we interviewed representatives from five national TSO employee groups<sup>12</sup> and from employee groups at each airport we visited.<sup>13</sup>

We also reviewed related documentation, including TSA's 2021 and 2023 Employee Engagement Action Plans (EEAP), which include TSA's assessment of key factors contributing to TSO engagement nationwide. We interviewed TSA human capital officials to understand how they conducted this analysis. We also reviewed TSA documentation related to officer staffing levels and overtime use from 2020 through 2022 and performance ratings in 2022.

To address our second objective, we reviewed agency documentation and interviewed TSA officials about the agency's past, ongoing, and planned efforts to improve employee engagement. We reviewed TSA's 2021 and 2023 EEAPs; information TSA used to inform the EEAPs; related goals, performance measures, targets, and results; and TSA's FEVS results from 2020 through 2023.<sup>14</sup>

We then reviewed TSA documentation describing how and the extent that TSA had implemented its planned actions, such as performance management guidance and job performance requirements, required and elective training courses offered to TSOs, action plans to improve

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<sup>11</sup>The five airports we visited were Ronald Reagan Washington National, Colorado Springs Municipal, Seattle-Tacoma International, Akron-Canton Regional, and Los Angeles International. See appendix I for information on our selection criteria. We held semi-structured discussion groups that provided a range of perspectives from 60 TSOs, 13 Lead TSOs, 12 Supervisory TSOs, 11 managers, and senior leaders across the five airports we visited.

<sup>12</sup>Specifically, the national TSO employee groups we interviewed include the National Advisory Council, which represents employees by collecting employee views through quarterly outreach efforts and making recommendations to leadership; the Human Capital Advisory Group, which provides employee feedback to leadership; the Inclusion Action Committee and the Diversity and Inclusion Change Agents Council, which focus on diversity, equity, and inclusion issues; and TSA national representatives for the American Federation of Government Employees, which is the union for TSOs.

<sup>13</sup>In our interviews, when discussing challenges related to employee engagement, some TSOs, airport leadership, and employee groups used the more general and familiar term employee "morale." Where such comments pertained to employee engagement, we use the term engagement for clarity and consistency throughout our report.

<sup>14</sup>For additional information about TSA's performance goals, measures, targets, and results, see appendix IV. For information about other actions TSA has taken to address additional areas that they determined to affect employee engagement, see appendix V.

employee engagement at local airports, individual and airport-level results from TSA's leadership surveys, and information on officer retention incentives.<sup>15</sup> We also reviewed TSA's strategic plan and the TSA Administrator's Intent 3.0 document to determine how the agency's actions fit within its wider priorities.<sup>16</sup>

To understand the extent to which TSA's actions address key drivers of TSO engagement, we interviewed TSA human capital officials in headquarters, TSO employee groups, and TSA employees at the five selected airports about TSA's local and nationwide efforts to improve TSO engagement. We evaluated TSA's actions against DHS guidance for developing EEAPs and TSA guidance for employees and airports receiving survey feedback.<sup>17</sup> Appendix I provides additional details on our scope and methodology.

We conducted this performance audit from June 2022 to February 2024, 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.

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## Background

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### TSO Workforce, Roles, and Responsibilities

TSA's approximately 61,000 employees include almost 50,000 TSOs who execute screening operations, as well as staff in management, analytical, administrative, and support roles. TSOs are to perform a variety of tasks

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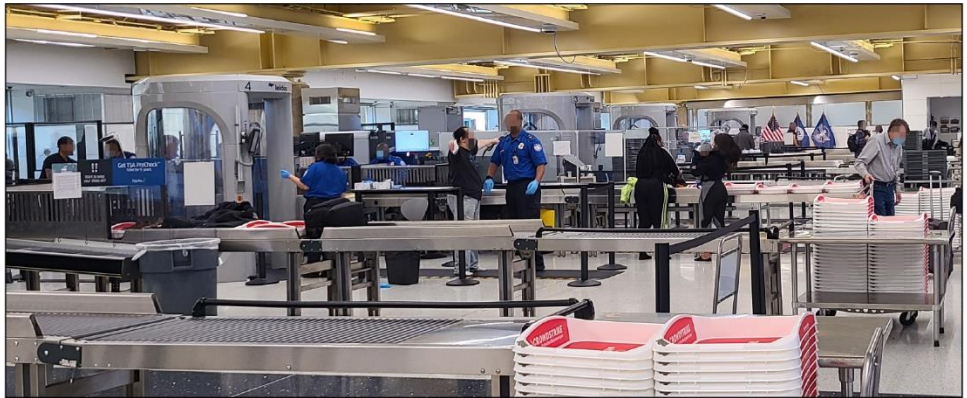
<sup>15</sup>TSA leadership at headquarters has required leadership at airports that receive FEVS results to submit an annual Local Action Plan. TSA human capital officials told us they asserted this requirement by including language in all Federal Security Director performance plans requiring that they develop a Local Action Plan based on FEVS results.

<sup>16</sup>TSA, *TSA Strategy 2018-2026* and TSA, *Administrator's Intent 3.0* (July 2023).

<sup>17</sup>DHS, Office of the Chief Human Capital Officer, *Employee Engagement Action Plan Guidance* (April 2022). This guidance provides a framework for component-level employee engagement action planning. We also reviewed examples of reports providing 2021 TSA Leadership for Engagement survey results to individuals and specific airports. These reports include guidance on steps to be taken by TSA leaders and airports receiving feedback results.

at airport screening checkpoints including verifying travel identification, screening passengers, and physically searching carry-on items.<sup>18</sup> TSOs are also responsible for screening checked baggage using technology and performing physical searches of checked baggage. Figure 1 shows TSOs screening passengers at an airport security checkpoint.

**Figure 1: Transportation Security Officers Screening Passengers at Ronald Reagan Washington National Airport in December 2022**



Source: GAO. | GAO-24-106052

**Accessible Text for Figure 1: Transportation Security Officers Screening Passengers at Ronald Reagan Washington National Airport in December 2022**

**Uniformed employees processing people inside building**

Source: GAO. | GAO-24-106052

Some TSOs—referred to as Lead TSOs—have responsibilities such as distributing and adjusting TSO workload and tasks. Lead TSOs oversee, but do not supervise, other TSOs.<sup>19</sup> TSOs and Lead TSOs report to Supervisory TSOs and Transportation Security Managers, whom we refer to as supervisors and managers, respectively, throughout our report.<sup>20</sup> Supervisory TSOs and managers report to the airport’s Federal Security

<sup>18</sup>According to information provided by TSA, as of September 2023, the TSO workforce was comprised of nearly 38,000 TSOs; 6,000 Lead TSOs; and about 4,800 Supervisory TSOs.

<sup>19</sup>For the purposes of this report, we refer to Lead TSOs as TSOs, unless otherwise noted.

<sup>20</sup>Supervisors are responsible for overseeing TSOs’ daily tasks and make security-based decisions to mitigate potential threats. Transportation Security Managers are responsible for managing screening checkpoints, assigning work and setting priorities, evaluating TSOs’ performance, and coaching and developing employees.

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Director and Assistant Federal Security Directors, who are responsible for leading and coordinating security operations at the nation's airports.<sup>21</sup> In this report, we refer to these officials as senior leadership.

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## Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey (FEVS)

OPM has administered the FEVS to federal employees annually since 2010.<sup>22</sup> Employee responses to FEVS questions measure their perceptions of whether, and to what extent, conditions characterizing successful organizations are present in their agencies.

### Employee Engagement Index (EEI)

The EEI uses 15 questions within the Federal Employment Viewpoint Survey to measure the conditions conducive to engagement. Some are statements that the employee indicates how much they agree with.

- In my organization, senior leaders generate high levels of motivation and commitment in the workforce.
- My organizations senior leaders maintain high standards of honesty and integrity.
- Managers communicate the goals of the organization.
- Overall, how good a job do you feel is being done by the manager directly above your immediate supervisor?
- I have a high level of respect for my organizations' senior leaders.
- Supervisors in my work unit support employee development.
- My supervisor listens to what I have to say.
- My supervisor treats me with respect.
- I have trust and confidence in my supervisor.
- Overall, how good a job do you feel is being done by your immediate supervisor?
- I feel encouraged to come up with new and better ways of doing things.
- My work gives me a feeling of personal accomplishment.
- I know what is expected of me on the job.
- My talents are used well in the workplace.
- I know how my work relates to the agency's goals.

Source: Office of Personnel Management. | GAO-24-106052

To measure conditions that lead to employee engagement, OPM uses 15 survey questions covering employee perceptions of leadership integrity and behaviors. This includes communication, the interpersonal relationship between the employee and supervisor, and employees'

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<sup>21</sup>See 49 U.S.C. § 44933.

<sup>22</sup>OPM administered the survey biennially from 2002 to 2008 and annually since 2010. When we refer to the 2022 FEVS, for example, we are referring to the survey OPM administered over a 6-week period during late spring and early summer 2022.

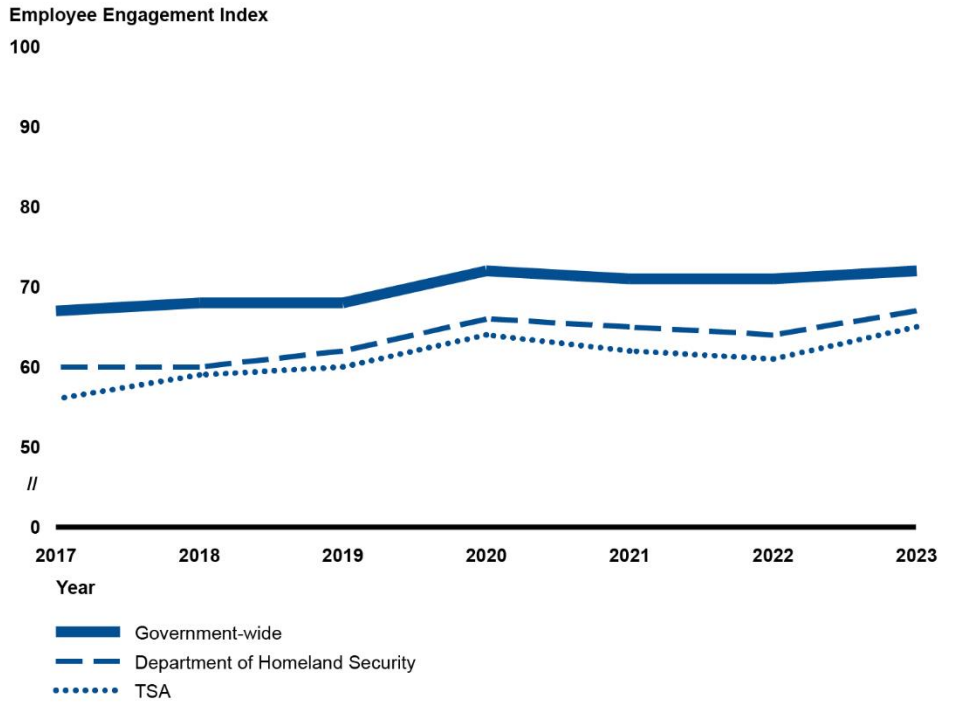
feelings of motivation and competency relating to their role in the workplace. OPM calculates the EEI by averaging the percent of positive responses to the 15 survey questions in the index.<sup>23</sup> The EEI is measured in percentage points on a scale of 0 to 100 with higher scores indicating an agency has the conditions that lead to higher employee engagement.

TSA's employee engagement scores have trended upward over the last 6 years but consistently remain below the government-wide and DHS averages, as shown in figure 2. Between 2020 and 2022, TSA's EEI score decreased 3 percentage points. Documentation of 2023 FEVS results DHS provided to us shows that in 2023, TSA's score increased 4 percentage points, while DHS's score increased 3 percentage points, and the government-wide average increased 1 percentage point.

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<sup>23</sup>The EEI is one of four indices OPM calculated in 2022 to synthesize FEVS data. In addition to the EEI, OPM calculated three other indices. The Global Satisfaction Index is a combination of employees' satisfaction with their job, their pay, and their organization, plus their willingness to recommend their organization as a good place to work. The Performance Confidence Index is a combination of five items assessing employees' perception of their work unit's ability to achieve goals and produce work at a high level. The Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Accessibility Index summarizes information about diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility.

**Figure 2: Transportation Security Administration (TSA) Employee Engagement Index Scores, 2017–2023**



Source: GAO analysis of Office of Personnel Management’s reported Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey data. | GAO-24-106052

**Accessible Data for Figure 2: Transportation Security Administration (TSA) Employee Engagement Index Scores, 2017–2023**

Year	Government-wide	Department of Homeland Security	TSA
2017	67	60	56
2018	68	60	59
2019	68	62	60
2020	72	66	64
2021	71	65	62
2022	71	64	61
2023	72	67	65

Source: GAO analysis of Office of Personnel Management’s reported Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey data. | GAO-24-106052

Note: The Employee Engagement Index is measured in percentage points on a scale of 0 to 100 with higher scores indicating an agency has the conditions that lead to higher employee engagement.

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## TSA's Employee Engagement Action Plans and Airports' Local Action Plans

**Employee Engagement Action Plan (EEAP):** Since 2012, DHS has required some major operational components, including TSA, to develop plans to improve employee engagement.<sup>24</sup> DHS guidance outlines six steps for developing and implementing these plans: (1) identify the issues, (2) set goals, (3) engage key stakeholders and identify available resources, (4) develop the action plan, (5) implement the action plan, and (6) monitor and evaluate the results of implementation.<sup>25</sup> DHS has required that components update these plans every 2 years.

TSA developed its first EEAP in 2021. To inform its 2021 EEAP, TSA officials estimate that they reviewed the results of 100 focus groups held at airports from 2016 to 2021 and aggregated the key findings.<sup>26</sup> They then factored in TSA's 2020 FEVS results and input from senior TSA leadership. Taking this information together, they identified four overarching "root causes" they determined affect TSO engagement—management and leadership, performance management, pay equity, and accountability for change.<sup>27</sup> They then identified actions they planned to take to address each of these issues in their 2021 EEAP.<sup>28</sup> Figure 3 shows the root causes, goals, and planned actions in TSA's 2021 EEAP.

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<sup>24</sup>The DHS components required to submit EEAPs are TSA, U.S. Secret Service, U.S. Customs and Border Protection, U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement, U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, the Federal Emergency Management Agency, the U.S. Coast Guard, and the Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency. TSA has had a plan to improve employee engagement since 2011 when they developed a "Corporate Action Plan" that identified root causes and actions to improve employee engagement. DHS and TSA now call these plans Employee Engagement Action Plans.

<sup>25</sup>DHS, Office of the Chief Human Capital Officer, *Employee Engagement Action Plan Guidance* (April 2022).

<sup>26</sup>TSA documentation indicates that during these focus groups TSOs, supervisors, managers, and other staff were asked to describe their experiences with various workplace issues and share their understanding of the root causes of these issues.

<sup>27</sup>As discussed later in this report, in some cases the "root causes" TSA identified in its EEAPs describe challenges with employee engagement, not the causes of the challenges.

<sup>28</sup>Although the focus of our review is TSO engagement, TSA's EEAPs are intended to improve the engagement of all TSA employees.



**Figure 3: Transportation Security Administration’s (TSA) 2021 Employee Engagement Action Plan**



Source: GAO analysis of TSA information; Icons-Studio/stock.adobe.com. | GAO-24-106052

**Accessible Text for Figure 3: Transportation Security Administration’s (TSA) 2021 Employee Engagement Action Plan**

Process number	TSA-identified root causes	Goals	Planned actions
One	Management and leadership	Improve leadership	Survey employees about TSA leadership
Two	Performance management	Improve workforce compensation and rewards	Implement programs to increase Transportation Security Officer pay recognition
Three	Pay equity	Improve workforce compensation and rewards	Implement programs to increase Transportation Security Officer pay recognition
Four	Accountability for change	Build accountability for improving employee engagement	Require airports to develop Local Action Plans <sup>a</sup>

Source: GAO analysis of TSA information; Icons-Studio/stock.adobe.com. | GAO-24-106052

<sup>a</sup>TSA’s Employee Engagement Action Plan focuses on improving employee engagement agency-wide, whereas Local Action Plans focus on improving employee engagement at individual airports.

TSA officials stated they followed a similar process in developing TSA’s 2023 EEAP—its most recent—which they issued in September 2023. To inform this new plan, TSA officials estimate that they reviewed the results from approximately 456 focus groups at 152 airports. They then categorized and counted drivers of engagement and root cause statements from the focus groups. According to TSA human capital officials, they then considered the focus group results together with the results of the 2022 FEVS and input from senior TSA leadership to identify three leading root causes—communication, engagement, and awards

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and recognition.<sup>29</sup> They also identified planned actions to address these issues.

**Airport Local Action Plans:** In 2020, TSA began requiring all airports that receive FEVS results to develop an annual Local Action Plan to improve employee engagement.<sup>30</sup> Local Action Plans are similar to TSA's agency-wide EEAP. The former focuses on improving employee engagement at individual airports, while the latter focuses on improving employee engagement TSA-wide.

To develop airport Local Action Plans, local facilitators are to lead focus groups of TSA employees.<sup>31</sup> Volunteers from the focus groups then form a committee to identify areas for improvement.<sup>32</sup> The focus groups and committees are to review the airport's prior year FEVS data, identify the underlying root causes of low employee engagement, and outline potential actions to address the issues they identify. According to TSA guidance, committees are to identify nine potential actions, and airport senior leadership is to select three of these nine actions to include in the Local Action Plan. TSA human capital officials told us that in 2023, 156

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<sup>29</sup>TSA's 2023 EEAP distinguishes between drivers of engagement and root causes. According to the EEAP, drivers are the overarching factors that support conditions for achieving an engaged workforce, and root causes are the underlying reason why a certain issue is occurring. The actions TSA identifies in its EEAPs are intended to address root causes.

<sup>30</sup>To ensure anonymity of FEVS respondents, TSA officials told us that only airports with 10 or more respondents receive a report with that airport's FEVS result. These airports are then to use this information to inform their Local Action Plans. In 2022, TSA did not require airports to develop and submit Local Action Plans because the 2021 FEVS data they would have used to inform their Local Action Plans was available for TSA as a whole but not for individual airports. TSA human capital officials said that beginning in 2023, TSA will require that airports develop Local Action Plans every 2 years.

<sup>31</sup>TSA headquarters provided guidance and training to help airports develop their Local Action Plans. According to TSA officials, as of June 2023, TSA had trained 175 individuals to help facilitate the development of Local Action Plans and provided additional support to airports that requested assistance.

<sup>32</sup>TSA headquarters refers to these committees as "action teams," although airports vary in their terminology.

airports developed Local Action Plans.<sup>33</sup> Figure 4 shows a brainstorming step in the process of developing Akron-Canton's Local Action Plan.

**Figure 4: Example of Local Action Planning Process at Akron-Canton Airport in January 2023**



Source: GAO. | GAO-24-106052

**Accessible Text for Figure 4: Example of Local Action Planning Process at Akron-Canton Airport in January 2023**

Categorized post-it notes on wall

Source: GAO. | GAO-24-106052

<sup>33</sup>TSA human capital officials told us that in 2023, TSA required 206 airports to submit Local Action Plans to TSA headquarters, and 156 airports did so. Human capital officials said that TSA had not monitored whether airports submitted the required Local Action Plans to headquarters. However, during our review, TSA determined that going forward, human capital officials would collect all Local Action Plans and provide TSA headquarters, the Federal Air Marshal Service, and airport leadership with weekly updates on the number of plans submitted and the locations that are still pending. They stated that, if needed, escalation of delinquent plans would be made to the appropriate TSA Executive Assistant Administrator.

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## Five Key Drivers Affect TSO Engagement

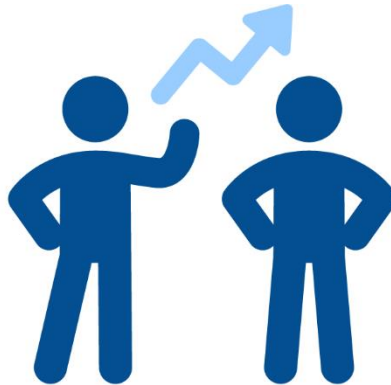
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### Five Key Drivers, Such as Managing and Recognizing Performance and Ensuring Communication from Management, Affect TSO Engagement

Our analysis indicates that there are five key drivers of TSO engagement:

- Managing and recognizing employee performance,
- Providing opportunities for career development,
- Supporting employee work-life balance,
- Demonstrating responsiveness to employee input, and
- Ensuring communication from management.<sup>34</sup>

#### Managing and Recognizing Employee Performance



Source: Icons-Studio/stock.adobe.com. | GAO-24-106052

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<sup>34</sup>These key drivers have generally been consistent over time. Specifically, with the exception of demonstrating responsiveness to employee input, we identified these same key drivers when we conducted a similar regression analysis of 2019 FEVS data for TSA. That analysis did not focus on TSOs, but rather identified the key drivers for all TSA employees. We also identified four of these five drivers in prior analyses of key drivers of DHS employee engagement, published in 2021 and 2015. See [GAO-21-204](#) and GAO, *Federal Workforce: Additional Analysis and Sharing of Promising Practices Could Improve Employee Engagement and Performance*, [GAO-15-585](#) (Washington, D.C.: July 14, 2015).

Our analysis identified managing and recognizing employee performance as one key driver of TSO engagement.<sup>35</sup> TSA also identified performance management as a root cause of low employee engagement in its 2021 EEAP. According to this plan, participants in focus groups, including TSOs, expressed concerns about the inconsistent application of the performance management process used to assess employee performance. They also expressed frustration with inadequate formal and informal recognition for good work. Relatedly, TSA's 2023 EEAP identified "awards and recognition" as a root cause of low employee engagement. The 2023 EEAP noted that employees believed TSA's recognition programs for TSOs failed to operate effectively and efficiently.<sup>36</sup>

In recent years, TSA made changes to its performance management system that may have reduced the frequency and detail of conversations between supervisors and their employees. Specifically, in 2019, TSA changed performance expectations for supervisors to remove a prior requirement that Supervisory TSOs document 12 instances of coaching TSOs per quarter.

Additionally, in 2020, TSA moved from a 4-point rating scale to a pass/fail system for TSOs. This reduced opportunities for variation in ratings that could help distinguish differences in TSO performance. According to TSA officials, in fiscal year 2022, four out of 35,204 TSOs (0.01 percent) received the "fail" rating of "Does Not Meet Standards."<sup>37</sup> Similarly, according to officials, two out of 6,986 Lead TSOs (0.03 percent) and none of the 4,829 Supervisory TSOs received the rating of "Does Not Meet Standards." TSA human capital officials told us TSA made this change to shift the focus of performance feedback conversations from the

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<sup>35</sup>Our regression analysis found that TSOs who agreed with the following FEVS question had a higher score (by 10.6 percentage points) on the EEI, which is one measure of employee engagement: "My supervisor provides me with constructive suggestions to improve my job performance." This suggests that receiving performance feedback is important for TSOs to feel engaged in their jobs.

<sup>36</sup>Specifically, TSA's 2023 EEAP says "Employees feel that recognition and award programs fail to operate effectively and efficiently and lack integrity due to favoritism. Additionally, they feel a lack of commitment from leaders, managers, and supervisors to successfully execute existing programs with transparency."

<sup>37</sup>According to TSA, employees who are rated as "Does Not Meet Standards" are required to develop a plan to work towards performance improvement in a timely manner. These employees may also become ineligible for some employee awards. In some cases, these employees may not be allowed to perform certain security functions without supervision.

numerical rating and its effect on an employee's compensation to the substantive feedback.

Further, representatives from employee groups we interviewed noted dissatisfaction with inconsistent management of TSOs' performance. For example, the national TSA union representative stated that the quality and frequency of performance conversations within the same airport may differ depending on the TSOs' supervisors. Similarly, representatives from the National Advisory Council told us that the amount and depth of performance conversations varied by airport. These representatives explained that some managers do not provide employees with constructive feedback if the employees are performing well, but high-performing employees also wanted feedback to help them further develop in their careers.

Moreover, TSOs at all five airports we visited also reported that the quality and frequency of performance conversations varied by supervisors. For example, TSOs at three of the five airports we visited noted that their performance conversations were limited. In particular, they noted that in some cases the supervisor told them to sign their printed performance review, without a constructive conversation on what they were doing well or how to improve.

### Providing Opportunities for Career Development



Source: Icons-Studio/stock.adobe.com. | GAO-24-106052

Our analysis identified providing opportunities for career development as a second key driver of TSO engagement.<sup>38</sup> In its 2021 EEAP, TSA identified “management and leadership” as a root cause of low employee engagement. Specifically, TSA identified challenges with management and leadership’s execution of their responsibilities, including their responsibility to help staff develop professionally, as a root cause of low employee engagement. TSA did not identify opportunities for career development as a root cause of low engagement in its 2023 EEAP.

However, representatives from employee groups and TSOs we interviewed expressed dissatisfaction with their opportunities to improve their skills and advance their careers. For example, representatives from the National Advisory Council said that it was challenging for TSOs to get information about opportunities for career advancement. We heard similar concerns from employee groups at two of the five airports we visited. For example, at one airport, representatives from a TSO employee group stated that there was a lack of clarity around the promotion process because officers who were not selected for a promotion did not receive information as to why or how to improve their application materials. Further, TSOs at four airports told us that favoritism affected their opportunities to develop their skills and get promoted.

In addition, TSOs at two airports told us the training they received as TSOs was unhelpful in developing their careers. For example, at one airport, TSOs we met with said that TSA’s online training classes were redundant with prior training they had taken and did not assist them in advancing their careers. At another airport, TSOs said the training classes helped them improve their technical skills but not skills that would help them become eligible for promotion to Supervisory TSO. Additionally, TSOs at three airports stated that insufficient time and access to computers during their shifts hindered their ability to complete training.

Conversely, TSOs at two airports noted that collateral duties—tasks officers can complete in addition to or in lieu of their regular duties—can

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<sup>38</sup>Our regression analysis found that TSOs who agreed with the following FEVS questions had a higher score (10.1 percentage points and 6.4 percentage points higher, respectively) on the EEI, which is one measure of employee engagement: “I am given a real opportunity to improve my skills in my organization” and “My work unit has the job-relevant knowledge and skills necessary to accomplish organizational goals.” This suggests that opportunities to develop one’s career are important for TSOs to feel engaged in their jobs. We combined these two questions into one driver because they are closely related.

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be good opportunities for career development when these opportunities are available, well-communicated, and relevant to a TSO's interests. For example, a TSO at one airport said that the opportunity to complete a detail assisting with payroll was a positive developmental experience given the officer's career interests.

### Supporting Employee Work-Life Balance



Source: Icons-Studio/stock.adobe.com. | GAO-24-106052

Our analysis identified supporting employee work-life balance as another key driver of TSO engagement.<sup>39</sup> TSA did not identify this as a root cause of TSO engagement in its 2021 or 2023 EEAPs.

In addition, representatives from employee groups we interviewed said that employees' work-life balance issues affect TSO engagement. National Advisory Council representatives noted that TSOs often have unpredictable work schedules. They explained that officers' work schedules changed when, for example, airlines change their flight schedules. Additionally, senior leadership at one airport stated that TSOs who are parents can have trouble securing childcare that works with their shift schedule.

Further, TSOs at four of the five airports we visited reported challenges requesting and taking annual leave. This included having to request leave many months in advance or new employees not being able to take vacation days during the summer. TSA officials told us that the agency's

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<sup>39</sup>Our regression analysis found that TSOs who agreed with the following FEVS question had a higher score (by 9 percentage points) on the EEI, which is one measure of employee engagement: "My supervisor supports my need to balance work and other life issues." This suggests that support for employees' work-life balance is important for TSOs to feel engaged in their jobs.



staffing model—a tool for calculating resource needs at each airport—accounts for the projected annual and sick leave of staff at each airport. However, they explained that they cannot grant all TSO leave requests or provide all TSOs with their desired work hours due to the operational demands of passenger volumes and the variable demand for different shifts.

TSO overtime has increased, and TSA officials told us that this has affected employee work-life balance. TSA data show that TSOs as a group worked more overtime in fiscal year 2022 than in fiscal year 2020—increasing from 1.2 percent of total TSO work hours in fiscal year 2020 to 4.3 percent in fiscal year 2022. A senior representative from TSA’s Human Capital Advisory Group said that TSOs can be required to work overtime due to understaffing, which can lead to a potential increase in attrition.

Further, senior leadership at four of the five airports we visited said that limited staff, including an insufficient number of TSOs available during any given shift, made it difficult for employees to achieve work-life balance. TSOs at one of these airports also said that mandatory overtime led to burnout. Representatives from an employee group at this airport said that staffing challenges were exacerbated by the increase in passenger traffic in recent years.<sup>40</sup>

### Demonstrating Responsiveness to Employee Input



Source: Icons-Studio/stock.adobe.com. | GAO-24-106052

<sup>40</sup>For more information about recent trends in airline passenger volume, see GAO, *Airline Passenger Protections: Observations on Flight Delays and Cancellations, and DOT’s Efforts to Address Them*, [GAO-23-105524](#), (Washington, D.C.: Apr. 13, 2023).

Our analysis identified that demonstrating responsiveness to employee input is an additional key driver of TSO engagement.<sup>41</sup> TSA identified this issue as a root cause of low employee engagement in both its 2021 and 2023 EEAPs. In its 2021 EEAP, TSA defined this root cause as related to leaders listening to the concerns of staff and implementing positive organizational change. TSA's 2023 EEAP states that "employees feel there is insufficient effort made by leadership and management to engage employees to actively solicit input, ask for feedback, collaborate on decisions, and understand their concerns, which diminishes an employee's sense of involvement or influence on workplace priorities or governance."

Representatives from one airport employee group and TSOs at multiple airports expressed concerns about how TSA management responds to TSO input. In some cases, TSOs stated that management had created an environment that doesn't welcome input. An employee group representative at one airport stated that some TSOs were reluctant to give supervisors feedback because they worried about retaliation. TSOs at two airports also told us that some employees were reluctant to give feedback to their supervisors because of privacy concerns.

In other cases, TSOs told us they expected that providing input would not lead to change. TSOs at three airports we visited stated their feedback to management was not acted upon. For example, at one airport, TSOs told us that they provided suggestions to improve morale, but management did not prioritize the issues they raised. These TSOs said that they felt discouraged about the lack of change because they perceived that management was generally aware of these concerns. In contrast, TSOs at two airports said they felt heard and supported by their manager or senior leadership, and this was beneficial to their engagement.

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<sup>41</sup>Our regression analysis found that TSOs who agreed with the following FEVS question had a higher score (by 8.5 percentage points) on the EEI, which is one measure of employee engagement: "Management encourages innovation." In addition to management encouragement of innovation, we identified additional ways demonstrating responsiveness to employee input drives TSO engagement through, for example, our interviews with TSO employee groups and TSOs. This suggests that management's perceived value of TSO input is important for TSOs to feel engaged in their jobs.

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Ensuring Communication from Management



Source: Icons-Studio/stock.adobe.com. | GAO-24-106052

Our analysis identified communication from management as a key driver of TSO engagement.<sup>42</sup> TSA identified communication as a root cause of low engagement in its 2023 EEAP. Specifically, TSA’s 2023 EEAP stated that employees felt uninformed and frustrated with the lack of consistent, timely, and reliable communication. It further stated that this contributed to a disconnected workforce who “lacked confidence in their understanding of important workplace issues.”<sup>43</sup>

Representatives from employee groups, senior leadership, and TSOs we met with at all five airports described challenges with communication from management. National Advisory Council representatives said that TSOs often did not receive communication from TSA headquarters because they did not have time during their workday to access their work email, which is TSA’s primary way of communicating with employees. These representatives noted that as a result, information about changes in agency policies or other topics did not reach TSOs. Senior leadership at one airport and representatives from two employee groups stated that TSOs did not have enough time to check their emails.

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<sup>42</sup>Our regression analysis found that TSOs who responded positively to the following FEVS question had a higher score (by 6.1 percentage points) on the EEI, which is one measure of employee engagement: “How satisfied are you with the information you receive from management on what’s going on in your organization?” This suggests that communication from TSA management is important for TSOs to feel engaged in their jobs.

<sup>43</sup>The 2021 EEAP did not list communication as a top three root cause of employee engagement. However, in explaining the “management and leadership” root cause, which was in the top three, it stated that communication and other issues tied to the effectiveness of mid-level management were a major root cause of low employee engagement and satisfaction.

TSOs we met with at four airports said managers or senior leadership did not adequately communicate with each other and the rest of the workforce. TSOs at one airport described challenges with communication from management but also noted that instances of good communication from management, such as informative weekly videos, had positively affected their engagement. TSOs from two airports said that their daily shift briefings—pre-shift meetings where Supervisory TSOs can share information with officers—did not include useful or up-to-date information. Figure 5 shows TSOs gathered for a shift briefing.

**Figure 5: Transportation Security Officers Gather for a Shift Briefing at a Los Angeles International Airport Security Checkpoint in February 2023**



Source: GAO. | GAO-24-106052

**Accessible Text for Figure 5: Transportation Security Officers Gather for a Shift Briefing at a Los Angeles International Airport Security Checkpoint in February 2023**

Uniformed employees participating in indoor meeting

Source: GAO. | GAO-24-106052

## TSA Has Taken Actions to Address Key Drivers of Employee Engagement but Has Not Fully Addressed Root Causes of TSO Dissatisfaction

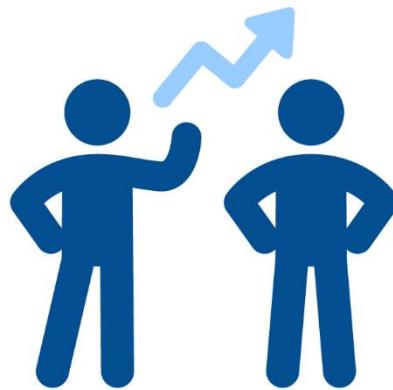
TSA has taken various actions intended to improve employee engagement. These include steps related to each of the five key drivers of employee engagement we identified. However, TSA has not fully

addressed the root causes of TSO dissatisfaction. In some cases, TSA has identified the issues that negatively affect employee engagement but has not identified the root cause of these issues or taken steps to address them. In other cases, TSA has taken actions to improve employee engagement but has not fully tracked or monitored follow-through on its plans. According to DHS guidance for efforts to improve employee engagement, effectively addressing current issues and preventing future problems requires identifying underlying root causes and implementing actions that address the root causes.<sup>44</sup>

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### TSA Has Taken Action to Better Manage and Recognize TSO Performance but Has Not Fully Addressed Root Causes of Officer Dissatisfaction

TSA has taken steps to address challenges with managing and recognizing TSO performance. In 2018, TSA began requiring that all supervisors complete a new performance management course. In addition, in 2021, TSA instituted two agency-wide programs to reward TSO performance. However, these actions do not fully address the underlying root causes of continued TSO dissatisfaction with how TSA manages and recognizes employee performance.



Source: Icons-Studio/stock.adobe.com. | GAO-24-106052

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<sup>44</sup>DHS, *Employee Engagement Action Plan Guidance*. This guidance provides a framework for component-level employee engagement action planning and, according to DHS, is based on industry and OPM best practices. According to the guidance, action planning is used to improve organizational performance. The guidance provides six key elements for action planning including identifying the issues, setting goals, engaging stakeholders, developing the action plan, implementing the action plan, and monitoring the results.

- **Performance management course:** According to TSA officials, in September 2018, TSA began requiring all supervisors, managers, and leaders to take a 1-hour OPM leadership course, called Performance Management Plus, once every 3 years.<sup>45</sup> This course emphasizes the role of supervisors and managers in employee development and coaching. According to TSA officials, as of September 2023, almost all (approximately 99 percent) of TSA’s currently employed Supervisory TSOs had completed this course. TSA officials said the voluntary feedback from employees who participated in the course had been generally positive; 62 percent of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that they were satisfied with the course.
- **Model Officer Recognition Program:** In January 2021, TSA began the Model Officer Recognition Program to award top-performing TSOs with either monetary awards, non-monetary awards such as time off, or a 3 percent salary increase. According to program guidance, TSA is to grant the monetary or time-off awards quarterly to TSOs who are recognized by their supervisors or senior leadership for their contributions.<sup>46</sup> This may include outstanding threat detection during local testing or incident response. According to TSA officials, as of June 2023, TSA had provided TSOs approximately 17,500 monetary awards and 2,600 time-off awards under this program.<sup>47</sup>

Following a TSA-wide pay increase in July 2023, TSA retained the quarterly monetary and non-monetary awards but modified the salary increase part of the program.<sup>48</sup> Prior to the pay increase, according to program guidance, TSA leadership were to annually select no more than the top 5 percent of TSOs for a 3 percent pay increase. To be eligible, TSOs must have demonstrated outstanding ability in their

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<sup>45</sup>This course was an addition to other performance management courses TSA requires that supervisors, managers, and leaders take to help improve their leadership skills. For example, since May 2010, TSA officials said the agency has required all supervisors to take a leadership course called Foundations of Leadership that trains supervisors on how to motivate people to maximize performance and build high-performing teams.

<sup>46</sup>TSOs must also meet other prerequisites for nomination to the Model Officer Recognition for quarterly monetary and time-off awards. They must (1) have been employed with TSA for a minimum of 12 months in an eligible position, (2) be continuously certified in a screening function, (3) not be on a performance improvement plan, (4) not have disciplinary or adverse actions during the quarter recommended, and (5) not have been a cause of a security breach. TSA, *Model Officer Recognition User’s Guidance* (January 1, 2022).

<sup>47</sup>These are counts of unique TSOs for each award type, but an individual TSO may have received more than one type of award.

<sup>48</sup>See appendix V for additional information about this pay increase.

technical screening skills, core values, and teamwork.<sup>49</sup> Since the July 2023 pay increase, according to TSA documents, eligible TSOs are to receive a one-step increase from the officers' current pay band and step.<sup>50</sup> TSA human capital officials said they implemented these changes to align the Model Officer Recognition Program pay increase with the agency's 10-step pay plan that mirrors other programs used by federal agencies that follow the General Schedule. According to TSA officials, as of September 2023, TSA had awarded over 2,500 annual pay increases through the Model Officer Recognition Program since 2021.

- **TSO Career Progression Program:** In March 2021, TSA initiated its Career Progression Program, which covers pay increases at different TSO career levels. Specifically, this program grants TSOs non-competitive pay increases after completing 6 and 18 total months of service and training requirements. According to program guidance, TSOs who meet certain eligibility requirements can apply for a competitive promotion called career level E3. Such requirements include receiving a passing performance rating, completing two advanced technical training courses, and completing one leadership or development program.<sup>51</sup> TSOs who are selected for E3 are to take on additional responsibilities, such as on-the-job coaching, and are

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<sup>49</sup>They must meet several additional prerequisites for nomination for an annual pay increase through the Model Officer Recognition program. Specifically, officers must (1) have been employed with TSA for at least 24 months, (2) received a passing performance rating, (3) received at least one Model Officer monetary or non-monetary award, (4) maintained their screening certification, and (5) remained current on training requirements, among other requirements. TSA, *Model Officer Recognition User's Guidance* (January 1, 2022).

<sup>50</sup>According to TSA documents, the same prerequisites for Model Officer pay increases apply to this modified program. These one-step increases—also referred to as quality band increases—are competitive, limited to no more than 5 percent of TSOs, and are subject to available funding.

<sup>51</sup>To meet the prerequisites for selection for the one-time E3 pay increase, officers must meet several eligibility requirements. Specifically, officers must (1) have received a passing performance rating, (2) been a TSO in an eligible position for a minimum of 12 months, (3) be certified to perform screening duties, (4) received no disciplinary or adverse actions, (5) successfully completed two training courses, among other requirements. In addition, officers must complete two advanced technical training courses such as behavior detection training and a leadership or development program such as TSA's Rising Leadership Development Program. TSA, Total Compensation Division, Human Capital, *Transportation Security Officer (TSO) Career Progression: E3 Selection Guide* (Mar. 15, 2021).

granted a 5 percent pay increase.<sup>52</sup> TSA data indicate that approximately 16 percent of TSOs employed in May 2023 (about 6,100 of 37,900) had received E3 pay increases through this program. TSA discontinued the E3 pay increases in July 2023 after implementing its agency-wide pay increase, which grants TSOs one non-competitive band increase after their first year and another non-competitive band increase after their second year. Lead TSOs also take on additional responsibilities, such as on-the-job coaching, that were previously required for E3 recipients.

While TSA has added a training course and instituted two reward programs, our interviews with representatives from employee groups and TSOs indicate that TSO dissatisfaction with how TSA manages and recognizes performance persist.

In its 2021 and 2023 EEAPs, TSA identified challenges with performance management as root causes of TSOs' low employee engagement but did not identify actions that fully address those root causes. Specifically, in its 2021 EEAP, TSA identified challenges related to the inconsistent application of the performance management process, subjective or uninformed performance appraisals, and inadequate formal and informal recognition for good work. Further, in its 2023 EEAP, TSA found that employees felt recognition and award programs failed to operate effectively, lacked integrity due to favoritism, and TSOs felt a lack of commitment from leaders, managers, and supervisors to execute existing programs with transparency.

The actions TSA has taken—a 1-hour training course for supervisors and two programs intended to recognize top performers—did not fully address the challenges that we and TSA identified regarding inconsistent application of the performance management process. Specifically, the training course is designed to communicate to supervisors the agency's expectations of them regarding staff coaching and development. It does not address the issue of subjective or uninformed performance appraisals. In addition, TSA has discontinued one of the two programs used to formally recognize top performers, and these programs do not address TSO dissatisfaction with inconsistent application of the performance management process.

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<sup>52</sup>Transportation Security Administration, *Transportation Security Officer (TSO) Career Progression: E3 Selection Guide*.



TSA human capital officials told us they did not identify actions to address challenges related to performance management. Instead, they had been focused on transitioning from a 4-point performance rating scale to a pass/fail system, increasing pay and compensation, and creating rewards for high performers. However, TSA's 2023 EEAP found that TSOs felt the rewards and recognition programs were not operating effectively. In addition, we found that TSO concerns about subjective or uninformed performance appraisals persist.

By identifying and implementing actions that address the underlying root causes of TSO dissatisfaction with how TSA manages and recognizes performance, as appropriate, and consistent with DHS guidance, the agency could better target its efforts to improve TSO engagement.<sup>53</sup> More engaged TSOs may be more innovative, productive, committed to their job, and less likely to leave.<sup>54</sup>

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### TSA Has Expanded TSO Training but Has Not Identified and Addressed Root Causes of Officer Dissatisfaction

TSA has expanded basic skills training for all new TSOs to provide greater opportunities for officers to develop their careers. However, TSA has not identified the underlying root causes of continued TSO dissatisfaction with their opportunities for career development or identified and implemented actions to address those root causes.



Source: Icons-Studio/stock.adobe.com. | GAO-24-106052

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<sup>53</sup>DHS, *Employee Engagement Action Plan Guidance*.

<sup>54</sup>[GAO-19-181](#).

According to TSA documentation, participants who took officer basic training in fiscal year 2022 prior to the expansion were generally satisfied with the training, but they wanted more opportunities to apply the skills they learned.<sup>55</sup> TSA officials told us that in January 2023, TSA expanded basic skills training for new TSOs from 2 weeks to 3 weeks. According to TSA documentation, the agency made this change to include training on TSA's mission, vision, and culture, as well as add more hands-on training on topics such as x-ray interpretation. TSA officials said approximately 6,200 TSOs completed this expanded training from January 2023 to September 2023.

Although TSA expanded TSO basic training, TSO concerns about the options to develop their careers persist. Our interviews with representatives from employee groups and TSOs indicate that some of the dissatisfaction involved lack of transparency about steps to further one's career, lack of TSO awareness of skill-building opportunities, and lack of time to participate in developmental opportunities. TSA's actions do not fully address these concerns.

TSA human capital officials said they recognize TSO concerns about their career development. In its 2021 EEAP, TSA identified challenges with management and leadership's execution of their responsibilities, including to help staff develop professionally, as a root cause of low employee engagement. However, the plan did not elaborate on the underlying causes as to why there is dissatisfaction around career development opportunities.

Although TSA did not identify this as a root cause of low TSO engagement in its 2023 EEAP, TSA human capital officials noted that TSO training and development is an organizational priority, and there have been some efforts to address this, as described above. However, agency officials said that, given competing priorities, they did not identify actions to address this in TSA's 2021 or 2023 EEAPs.

TSA's strategic plan includes an objective to foster an environment of continual learning and growth that instills shared organizational values and advances technical, critical thinking, and leadership skills.<sup>56</sup> In addition, DHS guidance for developing EEAPs states that effectively

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<sup>55</sup>TSA, Training and Development. *Level 3 Course Evaluation Transportation Security Officer Basic Training Program Phase 1 and 2*. Annual Report Fiscal Year 2022.

<sup>56</sup>TSA, *TSA Strategy 2018-2026*.

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addressing current challenges—such as TSO dissatisfaction with career development opportunities—and preventing future problems requires identifying underlying root causes and implementing actions that address the root causes. TSA can use the steps laid out in DHS guidance for developing employee action plans, including conducting a root cause analysis to determine the “why” behind these issues.<sup>57</sup> For example, this guidance states that the agency should state the problem and start asking “why” it exists. If the answer does not identify the root causes of the problem identified in the problem statement, ask “why” again.

Without further analyzing the underlying root causes of TSO dissatisfaction with their career development opportunities, TSA will have a difficult time targeting the specific problems with effective corrective actions. By identifying and implementing actions to address the identified root causes, as appropriate, TSA could improve TSO engagement.

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### TSA Has Taken Steps to Support Employees’ Work-Life Balance but Has Not Identified and Addressed Root Causes of Officer Dissatisfaction



Source: Icons-Studio/stock.adobe.com. | GAO-24-106052

TSA has taken steps to support employees’ work-life balance, but TSOs continue to face challenges in attaining that balance. For example, TSA has hired more TSOs to address staffing challenges and implemented a new system to electronically process annual leave and shift trade requests. In addition, some airports have scheduling committees that have proposed changes to address local employee scheduling challenges. However, TSA has not identified the underlying root causes of TSO dissatisfaction with their work-life balance or identified and

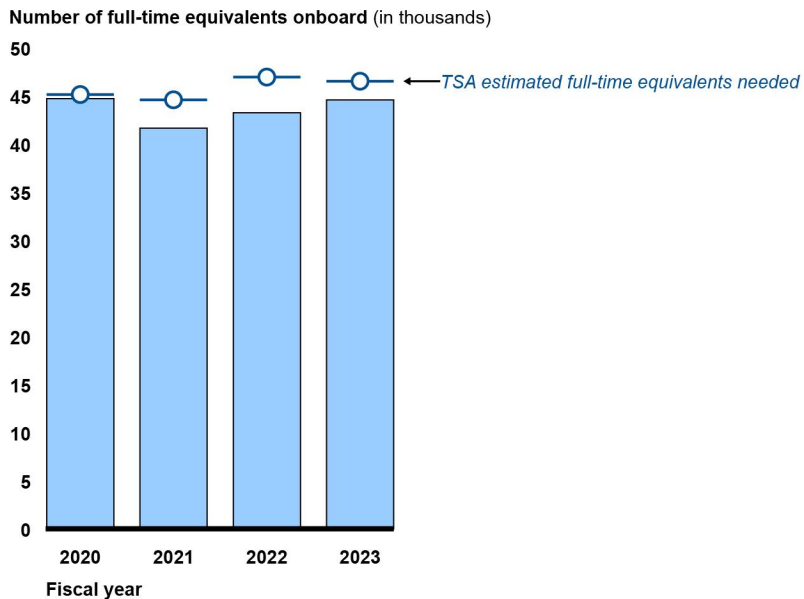
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<sup>57</sup>DHS, *Employee Engagement Action Plan Guidance*.

implemented actions, as appropriate, to address the underlying root causes.

One action TSA has taken that could help support TSO work-life balance is hiring more TSOs. TSA officials told us they required more TSOs due to increasing passenger volumes at U.S. airports. TSA data indicate that from fiscal years 2021 to 2023, it increased (1) the number of TSOs the agency needed and (2) the number of TSOs on-board.<sup>58</sup> Figure 6 shows the gap between the number of TSOs needed and those on-board has narrowed during this period: in fiscal year 2021, 93 percent of the required TSO positions were filled; in fiscal year 2022, 92 percent; and in fiscal year 2023, 96 percent.

**Figure 6: Transportation Security Officers TSA Estimated It Needed and On-Board, Fiscal Years 2020–2023**



Source: GAO analysis of Transportation Security Administration (TSA) data. | GAO-24-106052

<sup>58</sup>According to TSA human capital officials, for the period 2020 through 2023 TSA was appropriated funds sufficient to hire the number of TSOs they estimated TSA needed. Most recently, in fiscal year 2023, according to TSA human capital officials, TSA requested and received \$61 million to hire an additional 2,534 TSOs. As of September 2023, information TSA officials provided shows that they had hired 1,194 of these additional TSOs.

**Accessible Data for Figure 6: Transportation Security Officers TSA Estimated It Needed and On-Board, Fiscal Years 2020–2023**

Fiscal year	Number of full-time equivalents onboard	TSA estimated full-time equivalents needed
2020	44715	45136
2021	41648	44590
2022	43243	46954
2023	44580	46520

Source: GAO analysis of Transportation Security Administration (TSA) data. | GAO-24-106052

In addition, TSA human capital officials said that the July 2023 pay increase for TSOs has helped reduce attrition. According to TSA documentation, the TSO attrition rate decreased from about 17 percent in calendar year 2022 to about 12 percent in calendar year 2023, as of August 2023.<sup>59</sup>

Hiring or retaining more TSOs to further narrow this gap and better align actual staffing levels with TSO requirements could improve TSO work-life balance by, for example, reducing the demand for mandatory overtime. However, it is unlikely to address TSOs’ other work-life balance issues such as those related to how TSOs are scheduled. For example, hiring additional TSOs would not necessarily affect how airports staff shifts or how annual leave is allocated among TSOs.

In addition to increased hiring, TSA made changes to its electronic time, attendance, and scheduling system, which could increase work schedule flexibility. Specifically, TSA is moving airports from a paper-based process to an electronic scheduling system. According to TSA, the new system will allow TSOs to make—and supervisors to approve—leave and shift trade requests more efficiently. As of September 2023, TSA officials said the agency had implemented the new system at 149 airports.<sup>60</sup>

In addition, three of the five airports we visited have taken steps intended to support TSO work-life balance by improving the flexibility of TSOs’

<sup>59</sup>According to TSA documentation, attrition is the departure of employees from TSA for any reason, voluntary or involuntary, including resignation, termination, death, or retirement. Attrition rate is the total number of employees that leave TSA divided by the average number of employees at TSA over the course of the calendar year.

<sup>60</sup>TSA officials said the agency had implemented changes to its electronic time, attendance, and scheduling system starting in 2021 and has rolled the changes out to airports in phases. They expect to complete deployment to all airports in fiscal year 2025.

schedules. Officials at two airports we visited said they implemented a shift trading system to allow TSOs more flexibility, for example, if they need to take unplanned annual leave. In other examples, TSA leadership and TSOs at two airports we visited said they created local scheduling committees—largely composed of TSOs—to make suggestions to local leadership on how to address scheduling issues.<sup>61</sup> TSA leadership at one of these airports said many of the committee’s early suggestions were not operationally practical, but they have adopted some of the committee’s suggestions, such as adjusting shift start and stop times, and implementing 9-hour shifts 4 days per week.

While TSA has taken steps that could improve TSO work-life balance, our interviews with employee groups and TSOs indicate that TSOs continue to face challenges, as discussed earlier. TSA officials have not analyzed the underlying root cause of TSOs’ dissatisfaction with TSA support for their work-life balance. Our interviews with TSOs and senior leadership indicated that some of the dissatisfaction involved challenges such as taking leave, unpredictable work schedules, and increased overtime due to staffing shortages. These underlying issues have not been fully addressed by the steps TSA has taken.

According to TSA human capital officials, they are aware of TSOs’ dissatisfaction with their work-life balance and view this issue as part of TSA’s broader strategic priority “Commit To Our People” outlined in the Administrator’s Intent 3.0. However, these officials said they have not further analyzed the underlying root causes of TSO dissatisfaction because they did not see a need to do so. Officials noted that the nature of the position requires TSOs to work long hours, overtime, and holidays.

Further, TSA chief counsel officials stated that TSA’s expanded collective bargaining process and ongoing negotiations could help address TSOs’ dissatisfaction with their work-life balance by providing bargaining unit employees an opportunity to provide input on issues that affect their work-life balance, such as TSO scheduling.<sup>62</sup> In the meantime, TSA officials said they are limited in their ability to address TSOs’ dissatisfaction with their work-life balance because TSA would need to negotiate means to

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<sup>61</sup>TSA human capital officials told us they do not track which airports and how many airports have established scheduling committees, but they require that all but the smallest airports do so. Based on TSA data, in 2022, approximately 68 percent of airports would have been required to establish a scheduling committee.

<sup>62</sup>For additional information about expanded collective bargaining at TSA, see appendix V.

address this dissatisfaction through collective bargaining. Although collective bargaining may affect how TSA approaches any potential changes, further understanding the root causes of TSO dissatisfaction with their work-life balance would better prepare TSA to identify and engage in negotiation about solutions. Further, understanding the root causes could also potentially help TSA identify actions or solutions that don't require collective bargaining.

By analyzing the root causes of TSOs' dissatisfaction with their work-life balance and identifying actions to address them, consistent with DHS guidance, TSA would be better informed when engaging with the collective bargaining unit. By implementing these actions, as appropriate, TSA could better improve employee engagement.<sup>63</sup>

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### TSA Has Sought TSO Input to Improve Employee Engagement but Has Not Tracked and Monitored Steps Taken in Response

TSA has sought TSO input to improve engagement. For example, TSA solicited TSO input at airports through Local Action Plans and implemented a survey for TSOs on the performance of their supervisors and managers. However, TSA has not demonstrated responsiveness to this input by tracking or monitoring the actions taken in response.



Source: Icons-Studio/stock.adobe.com. | GAO-24-106052

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<sup>63</sup>DHS, *Employee Engagement Action Plan Guidance*.

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## Local Action Plans

In 2020, TSA began requiring airports that receive FEVS results to develop annual Local Action Plans to improve employee engagement, as mentioned previously. To develop Local Action Plans, committees of TSA employees at each airport are to convene to identify areas for improvement by reviewing the airports' prior year FEVS data, identifying the underlying root causes of low employee engagement, and identifying actions to address the issues. TSA requires that airports submit their three planned actions to TSA human capital officials in headquarters.

TSA human capital officials said they plan to continue requiring Local Action Plans, and they see this effort as key to improving TSO engagement. However, TSA analysis of FEVS data indicate that the development of these plans did not lead to the target level of improvement in subsequent FEVS results. Specifically, TSA found that 21 percent of the airports that were required to submit a Local Action Plan from 2020 to 2022 had increased their EEI scores by 2 percent. In contrast, TSA's stated target was for 50 percent of these airports to increase their EEI scores as a result of the required Local Action Plans.<sup>64</sup>

TSA human capital officials told us that each airport's leadership is responsible for sending the three planned actions from their Local Action Plan to headquarters and implementing those actions. However, we found that TSA headquarters does not know the extent to which airports do so.<sup>65</sup> Specifically, TSA does not track or monitor airports' progress to help ensure the planned actions are implemented. TSA officials told us they do not do so because they want airport leadership focused on implementing the actions, not on documenting their progress.

DHS guidance for EEAPs states that components should implement planned actions, such as those identified in airports' Local Action Plans.<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>64</sup>Appendix IV has more information on this and TSA's other performance measures and targets for improving employee engagement.

<sup>65</sup>TSA human capital officials said that TSA inspectors will start reviewing airport Local Action Plans as part of TSA's fiscal year 2024 routine airport inspections. As of September 2023, TSA human capital officials said TSA inspectors planned to conduct 18 to 20 inspections in fiscal year 2024. TSA officials and the inspector checklist we reviewed indicated that these reviews would check whether the Local Action Plans were prepared and consistent with TSA requirements, not whether the actions in the plan had been implemented.

<sup>66</sup>DHS, *Employee Engagement Action Plan Guidance*.



By tracking and monitoring airport leadership's implementation of the three planned actions in their Local Action Plans, TSA could help ensure planned actions are implemented in response to TSO feedback and realize the desired effect—improved employee engagement.

### Leadership for Engagement Survey

In 2021, TSA began administering an OPM survey, known as Leadership for Engagement, to collect feedback from all employees on their first-, second-, and third-line supervisors.<sup>67</sup> For a TSO, this would be their supervisor and manager. In turn, supervisors, managers, and other leaders have an opportunity to receive such feedback and use it to identify ways to improve their leadership. For example, supervisors could receive feedback to help them improve how they communicate or better help TSOs develop their careers.

Supervisors, managers, and senior leaders receive an individual survey feedback report as long as three or more of the employees they supervise have responded to the survey, according to TSA officials.<sup>68</sup> These officials said that in 2021, about 22,000 of the 57,000 TSA employees submitted survey responses. These responses resulted in over 4,500 supervisor reports that accounted for approximately 63 percent of supervisors.<sup>69</sup>

TSA guidance says recipients of survey feedback are to discuss the results with their supervisor and develop an individual action plan for addressing the feedback.<sup>70</sup> Further, DHS guidance for EEAPs states that components should track and monitor the outcomes of their efforts to ensure the intended results are being achieved.<sup>71</sup> However, TSA has not ensured that this occurs for the Leadership for Engagement survey. TSA

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<sup>67</sup>For the purposes of this report, we refer to the Leadership for Engagement and Inclusion Survey as the Leadership for Engagement Survey, consistent with how TSA officials generally refer to it.

<sup>68</sup>TSA also provides airport leadership a report that aggregates the survey results for supervisors, managers, and senior leadership within that airport.

<sup>69</sup>According to TSA officials, the first and second cycle of the 2023 survey was launched in February and September 2023, respectively. They told us that they plan to administer this survey to all employees every 2 years on a rolling basis, surveying a quarter of the workforce every 6 months.

<sup>70</sup>TSA, *Leadership for Engagement Survey: Individual Feedback Reports*. These reports include guidance on steps to be taken by TSA leaders receiving feedback results.

<sup>71</sup>DHS, *Employee Engagement Action Plan Guidance*.

human capital officials told us that while they are aware of some instances in which the survey results were useful to individuals, they otherwise do not have information on the extent to which survey results have been used or acted upon across the agency. TSA human capital officials told us that they plan to offer in-person and virtual information sessions to any leader who wants help understanding their unique survey results report and developing individual action plans.

While planning for such sessions is a positive step, TSA does not track and monitor whether survey feedback is discussed and if these individual action plans are developed and implemented. Rather, TSA human capital officials stated that employees and airports must take it upon themselves to review and determine what they will do to address the feedback from the survey. These officials said that employees who receive feedback are not required to take any action with it because TSA did not want the survey to be punitive. Ensuring that employees discuss the feedback with their supervisor and develop an individual action plan to address survey feedback does not need to be punitive. Rather, it is an opportunity for TSA and its managers to demonstrate to TSOs a commitment to addressing their concerns and holding themselves accountable for doing so.

TSA human capital officials stated they plan to continue administering the Leadership for Engagement survey, and they see this effort as key to improving TSO engagement. However, administering the survey—without tracking and monitoring whether the results were used—did not lead to TSA's target level of improvement in employee perceptions of leadership from 2020 to 2022.<sup>72</sup> For example, 2022 FEVS data indicate that the percent of TSA employees satisfied with their leadership decreased from 51 percent to 46 percent during this time.

By tracking and monitoring whether employees who receive survey results discuss them with their supervisors and develop and implement individual action plans, TSA would be better able to ensure

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<sup>72</sup>TSA's target was to observe in 2022 a 3 percent improvement from 2020 FEVS scores for both the FEVS Leaders Lead Index and the Supervisor Index, both of which are sub-indices of EEI that gauge employee perceptions of leadership. The Leaders Lead Index uses five survey questions that reflect the employees' perceptions of the integrity of leadership, as well as leadership behaviors such as communication and workforce motivation. The Supervisors Index uses five survey questions that reflect the interpersonal relationship between worker and supervisor, including trust, respect, and support.

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implementation and realize the desired effect of the leadership survey—positive organizational change and improved employee engagement.

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## TSA Has Taken Action to Improve TSA Management Communication with TSOs but Has Not Identified and Addressed Root Causes of Officer Dissatisfaction

TSA has taken several steps to improve management communication with TSOs, such as developing and launching a TSA mobile app and expanding the use of newsletters and videos. However, TSA has not fully identified the underlying root causes of TSO dissatisfaction with management communication or identified and implemented actions, as appropriate, to address the underlying root causes.



Source: Icons-Studio/stock.adobe.com. | GAO-24-106052

- **TSA mobile app:** In March 2018, TSA developed a mobile app called TSANEWS to enable more direct communication with TSOs and facilitate their access to agency-wide information—such as broadcast messages and TSA Administrator town halls, according to TSA officials. According to senior leadership we interviewed at one airport, this app provides a means for users to stay updated on developments within the agency and policy changes. However, TSA officials at three other airports we visited said they did not think TSOs widely used the TSA app because, for example, they did not want to have it on their personal phones. Information TSA provided to us indicates that about 800 unique users—approximately 1.3 percent of TSA’s total workforce—accessed the app each day.<sup>73</sup>
- **Expanded use of newsletters and videos:** Some airports have expanded their use of newsletters and videos to communicate

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<sup>73</sup>We reviewed TSA’s app usage data for 7 consecutive days in September 2023.

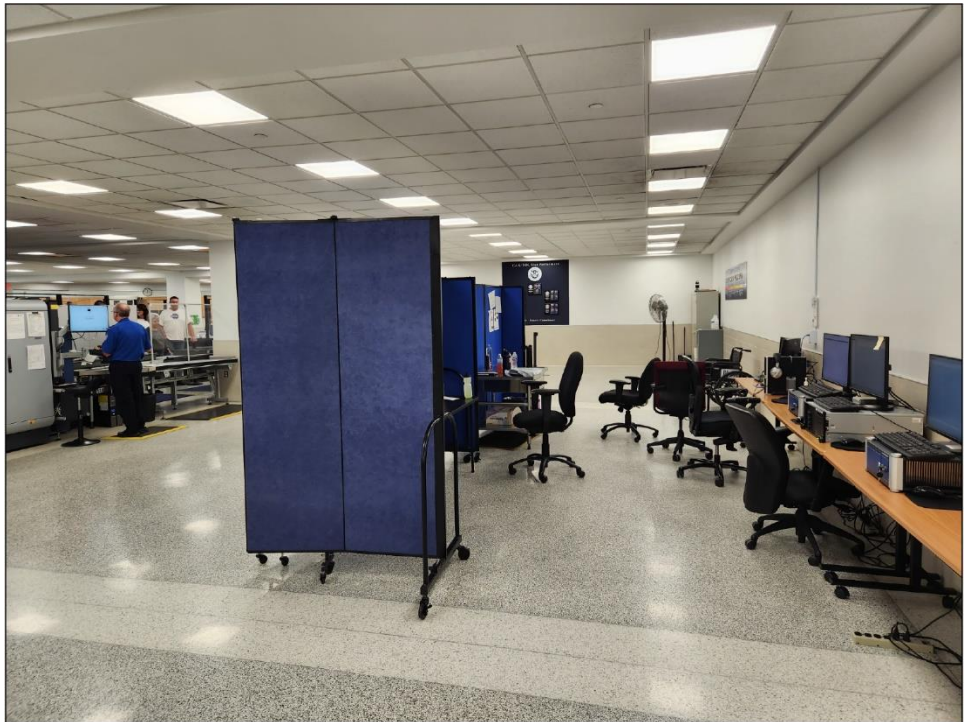
information to employees.<sup>74</sup> TSA headquarters does not track how many airports have newsletters, but human capital officials told us they expected that most of the larger airports did. According to these human capital officials, the newsletters typically make employees aware of local issues that impact their day-to-day routine, such as airport parking and new initiatives. They also often highlight examples of “good catches” where TSOs identified a threat during passenger or baggage screening. In addition, some airports developed videos to improve communication. For example, senior leadership at Los Angeles International Airport have developed videos to share such information with staff. According to these officials, they started creating the videos in 2017 and now produce them weekly. TSOs we met with at this airport said they thought that the videos were helpful, and senior leadership at this airport said these videos had improved information sharing within the airport.

In addition to these initiatives, TSA has continued its efforts to communicate with TSOs by providing employees with information through its online portal for employees, making TSA computers more accessible to TSOs, conducting town halls with TSA headquarters and airport leadership, and posting information on bulletin boards in break rooms. Figure 7 shows a computer station next to the passenger screening checkpoint at Akron-Canton Airport.

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<sup>74</sup>TSA human capital officials said they did not have complete information on which airports had newsletters but told us that some airports have had newsletters since 2002.

**Figure 7: Computers for Transportation Security Officers Near the Passenger Screening Checkpoint at Akron-Canton Airport**



Source: GAO. | GAO-24-106052

**Accessible Text for Figure 7: Computers for Transportation Security Officers Near the Passenger Screening Checkpoint at Akron-Canton Airport**

Large room with computer hardware on wide table

Source: GAO. | GAO-24-106052

Airport leadership told us they set up the station to improve TSO access to computers. TSOs we spoke with at Akron-Canton Airport noted that the additional computers near the checkpoint had been helpful and had further increased opportunities to access computers during breaks.

While TSA has taken actions to improve communication from management, our interviews indicate that TSO concerns about communication from management persist. For example, TSA human capital officials, senior leadership at one airport, and representatives from two employee groups said that TSOs do not have sufficient time during their workday to access their work email, which is TSA's primary way of communicating with employees.

TSA officials in headquarters and airports we visited stated that communication from headquarters often stops at the management level.<sup>75</sup> In the agency's 2023 EEAP, TSA identified "communication" among the leading causes of concern. According to the plan, TSOs reported they were frustrated with the lack of consistent, timely, and reliable communication, which resulted in incomplete, incorrect, and outdated information. As a result, TSA identified the need to enhance communication with the TSA workforce, with an emphasis on field staff, as a way to increase overall awareness of key agency issues and decisions. However, TSA has not fully identified the underlying root causes behind its communication challenges.

TSA officials said they did not further analyze the cause of its communication challenges because they expect that many communication challenges are specific to individuals or airports and can therefore be addressed through the Leadership for Engagement survey and airports' Local Action Plans. However, TSA's 2023 EEAP states that the agency's analysis identified common themes of dissatisfaction, and solutions to these challenges may be beyond the control of local leadership and therefore best addressed at the agency level. Although some communication challenges may be best addressed at the individual or airport level, TSA leadership would benefit from visibility into and can make changes to help address any systemic issues.

By analyzing the underlying root causes of its communication challenges leading to TSO dissatisfaction, consistent with DHS guidance, TSA would be better able to identify and target actions to more fully address employee issues.<sup>76</sup> Implementing such actions would help TSA to achieve its strategic plan objective to enhance communications with the TSA workforce with an emphasis on field staff and improve employee engagement.<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>75</sup>Management includes local Federal Security Directors, Assistant Federal Security Directors, and Transportation Security Managers.

<sup>76</sup>DHS, *Employee Engagement Action Plan Guidance*.

<sup>77</sup>TSA's strategic plan states that it is TSA's objective to establish effective communication channels. The TSA Administrator's Intent 3.0, published in July 2023, further elaborates on this, stating that it is TSA's objective to enhance communications with the TSA workforce with an emphasis on field staff. According to the TSA Administrator's Intent 3.0, the goal is for TSA leadership and staff at airports to effectively communicate across multiple platforms in a timely manner to increase workforce knowledge of the mission, key issues, and initiatives.

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See appendix V for information about other actions TSA has taken to address additional areas that they determined to affect employee engagement—increasing pay and compensation, providing greater personnel appeal rights, and expanding TSOs’ collective bargaining rights.

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## Conclusion

For over two decades, nearly 50,000 TSOs have served as the public-facing front line of U.S. aviation security. Their daily work is central to TSA’s security mission, yet their engagement—their sense of purpose in their job—has historically been among the lowest in the federal government. Improving TSO engagement is an important goal for TSA. An engaged TSO workforce may be more innovative, productive, and committed—and better ensure the security of U.S. commercial aviation and the flying public.

While TSA has identified issues that negatively affected employee engagement, they have not consistently identified the root causes of these issues or taken steps to fully address them. As a result, low engagement remains. For example, our interviews with TSOs and analysis of TSA survey results found that dissatisfaction persists among TSOs regarding how TSA manages and recognizes employee performance. By identifying the root causes of dissatisfaction and implementing steps to address them, TSA could better target their actions to improve employee engagement and result in a more effective workforce.

Further, while TSA identified some actions that could improve employee engagement, TSA has not fully tracked or monitored follow-through on its plans. For example, TSA has surveyed its workforce but has not tracked and monitored whether these survey results are used to improve employee engagement. By tracking and monitoring this, TSA would be better able to ensure implementation and realize the desired effect of the survey—positive organizational change and improved employee engagement.

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## Recommendations for Executive Action

We are making the following nine recommendations to TSA:

- The TSA Administrator should identify and implement actions, as appropriate, to address the underlying root causes of TSO dissatisfaction the agency has identified with how TSA manages and recognizes performance. (Recommendation 1)
- The TSA Administrator should conduct an analysis to identify the underlying root causes of TSO dissatisfaction with their opportunities for career development. (Recommendation 2)
- The TSA Administrator should identify and implement actions, as appropriate, to address the root causes of TSO dissatisfaction with their opportunities for career development. (Recommendation 3)
- The TSA Administrator should conduct an analysis to identify the underlying root causes of TSO dissatisfaction with TSA support for their work-life balance. (Recommendation 4)
- The TSA Administrator should identify and implement actions, as appropriate, to address the root causes of TSO dissatisfaction with TSA support for their work-life balance. (Recommendation 5)
- The TSA Administrator should track and monitor airport leadership progress implementing the three actions identified in each airport Local Action Plan to ensure the plans are implemented. (Recommendation 6)
- The TSA Administrator should track and monitor whether employees and supervisors discuss the results from Leadership for Engagement Surveys and use those results to inform the development and implementation of individual action plans. (Recommendation 7)
- The TSA Administrator should conduct an analysis to identify the underlying root causes of TSO dissatisfaction with communication from management. (Recommendation 8)
- The TSA Administrator should identify and implement actions, as appropriate, to address the root causes of TSO dissatisfaction with communication from management. (Recommendation 9)

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## Agency Comments and Our Evaluation

We provided a draft of this report to DHS for review and comment. In its comments, reproduced in appendix VI, DHS concurred with our recommendations and described planned actions to address them. DHS also provided technical comments, which we incorporated as appropriate.



DHS concurred with our first recommendation that TSA identify and implement actions, as appropriate, to address the underlying root causes of TSO dissatisfaction the agency has identified with how TSA manages and recognizes performance. In its response, TSA reported plans to solicit and use feedback on employees' perceptions of the quality of their performance discussions. In addition, TSA planned to update and provide training for supervisors on performance management, though it was unclear how the training would address the root causes of TSO dissatisfaction. These planned steps could help TSA collect additional information on TSO dissatisfaction and enhance supervisory training. To fully address the recommendation, TSA will need to demonstrate that they have used the information collected, the training provided, or have taken other steps to address the root causes of TSO dissatisfaction.

DHS also concurred with our recommendations to conduct an analysis to identify the underlying root causes of TSO dissatisfaction with their career development, their work-life balance, and communication from management (recommendations 2, 4, and 8). In its response, TSA reported plans to use airports' submitted Local Action Plans to identify root causes on a national level.

While the plans could provide useful information for TSA's root cause analysis, it will not provide the complete information TSA needs to obtain quality results if TSA reimplements its Local Action Planning process and analysis carried out in recent years. For example, Local Action Plans are intended to identify issues within the individual airport's control. As a result, these plans are unlikely to identify important root causes of TSO dissatisfaction that are beyond the control of local leadership and best addressed at the agency level. In its 2023 EEAP, TSA identified communication from management as one such issue. Additionally, in prior years, TSA has collected "root cause" statements through focus groups as part of the Local Action Planning process that identified problems or challenges but did not identify the underlying root causes—the why behind them. If TSA were to collect similar statements, they would be of limited use in determining the underlying root causes of TSO dissatisfaction. Finally, in prior years, when analyzing these "root cause" statements across all participating airports, TSA has grouped and aggregated them topically. This resulted in a list of "root causes" that were commonly cited problems but provided limited insight into the actual underlying root causes behind them. To fully address our recommendations, TSA's root cause analysis would need to include root causes beyond the control of local airport leadership and better ensure

that the local action planning process and subsequent analysis results in underlying root causes rather than problem statements or topics.

DHS concurred with our recommendations to identify and implement actions, as appropriate, to address the underlying root causes of TSO dissatisfaction with their career development, their work-life balance, and communication from management (recommendations 3, 5, and 9). In its response to these recommendations, DHS reported plans to identify and implement actions to address the root causes identified, as appropriate. These actions, if implemented as described, should address the intent of our recommendation.

DHS also concurred with our sixth recommendation to track and monitor airport leadership progress implementing the three actions identified in each airport Local Action Plan to ensure the plans are implemented. In its response, TSA reported plans to track and monitor submission of these plans and require airports to provide an update on efforts implemented midway through their 2-year action planning cycle. TSA did not specify how it will track and monitor the status of implementation at the end of the cycle. These actions could address the intent of our recommendation if implemented in a manner that provides visibility into airports' progress over time and helps TSA leadership better ensure planned actions are taken.

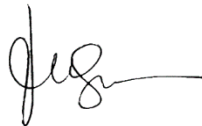
In addition, DHS concurred with our seventh recommendation to track and monitor whether employees and supervisors discuss the results from Leadership for Engagement Surveys and use those results to inform the development and implementation of individual action plans. In its response, TSA reported plans for coordinators to document whether these discussions have occurred, including any reasons why discussions did not occur. These actions, if implemented in a manner that provides TSA leadership with nationwide visibility into whether these steps are being taken as required, should address the intent of our recommendation.

Finally, in its response, DHS said that GAO could have done more to acknowledge recent improvements to TSO employee engagement, as demonstrated by 2023 FEVS results. In October 2023, TSA provided us with the 2023 FEVS results they obtained from OPM. We incorporated the new results and highlighted the improvement, as appropriate, throughout our report. However, we would have been unable to rerun our regression analysis using the 2023 data that DHS provided. Doing so would have required that we take additional steps to obtain 2023 FEVS

data for individual TSOs from OPM, which were not available at the time of our review. Additionally, as noted earlier in our report, the key drivers of employee engagement we identified have generally been consistent over time. Therefore, we maintain that the key drivers we identified through our analysis of 2022 FEVS results, as well as interviews with TSOs and employee groups during the course of our review, are appropriate to inform TSA's continuing efforts to improve employee engagement.

We are sending copies of this report to the appropriate congressional committees, the Secretary of the Department of Homeland Security, and other interested parties. In addition, the report is available at no charge on the GAO website at <https://www.gao.gov>.

If you or your staff have any questions about this report, please contact me at (202) 512-8461 or [shermant@gao.gov](mailto:shermant@gao.gov). Contact points for our Offices of Congressional Relations and Public Affairs may be found on the last page of this report. GAO staff who made major contributions to this report are listed in appendix VII.



Tina Won Sherman  
Director, Homeland Security and Justice

## Appendix I: Objective, Scope, and Methodology

This report examines (1) the key drivers that affect Transportation Security Officer (TSO) engagement and (2) the extent to which the Transportation Security Administration (TSA) has taken actions to address key drivers of TSO engagement.

To address our first objective, we conducted a regression analysis of the Office of Personnel Management's (OPM) 2022 Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey (FEVS) record-level results for TSOs—the most recent data available at the time we conducted our analysis.<sup>1</sup> We used this regression analysis to test which survey questions were most strongly associated with an individual officers' Employee Engagement Index (EEI) score, after controlling for other factors such as demographics. This index measures the conditions that lead to employee engagement. For additional information about our regression analysis, see appendix II.

To assess the reliability of the FEVS data, we reviewed TSOs' response rates from the 2022 survey and conducted tests to identify errors and missing data. We also reviewed OPM documentation to determine how it designed and administered its 2022 survey. In addition, we interviewed OPM officials knowledgeable about the survey data to ensure we understood how to appropriately characterize them. We determined that the data were sufficiently reliable for the purposes of identifying the key drivers of employee engagement for TSOs.

We also reviewed related documentation, including TSA's 2021 and 2023 Employee Engagement Action Plans (EEAP), which include TSA's assessment of key factors contributing to TSO engagement nationwide. We interviewed TSA human capital officials to understand how they conducted this analysis. We also reviewed TSA documentation related to

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<sup>1</sup>Regression analysis is a statistical method for estimating the relationship between different variables. For a detailed description of our regression analysis methodology, see appendix II. By record-level, we mean that we analyzed the anonymized individual survey responses for all the 14,223 TSOs who completed the 2022 survey. (43,271 TSOs received the survey.) The response rate for TSOs was approximately 33 percent. We obtained 2023 survey results for DHS and TSA in October 2023, but the record-level results were not available to us as of December 2023.

officer staffing levels and overtime use from 2020 through 2022, and performance ratings in 2022.

To obtain employee perspectives on the factors that affect TSO engagement, we interviewed TSA employees at five airports between December 2022 and April 2023. The five airports we visited were Ronald Reagan Washington National, Colorado Springs Municipal, Seattle-Tacoma International, Akron-Canton Regional, and Los Angeles International. We selected these airports to capture (1) varying levels of TSO EEI scores from 2019 to 2022, (2) varying degrees of FEVS EEI score improvement from 2019 through 2022, and (3) airports that have and have not implemented specific initiatives to improve employee engagement.

At each airport, we interviewed a non-generalizable sample of TSOs, Lead TSOs, Supervisory TSOs, managers, and senior leaders.<sup>2</sup> For the TSOs, Lead TSOs, and Supervisory TSOs, we randomly selected interview participants from a list of employees scheduled to work during our visits. We held semi-structured discussion groups led by a moderator who followed a standardized list of topics but allowed for unstructured follow-up questions. As a result, officials we spoke with did not share a perspective on each issue at each airport. The results from these group discussions are not generalizable to all employees, but they provide a range of perspectives from 60 TSOs, 13 Lead TSOs, 12 Supervisory TSOs, 11 managers, and senior leaders across the five airports we visited.

To capture broader employee perspectives, we also interviewed national and airport-specific employee groups. We interviewed representatives from five national TSO employee groups we identified during our review. Within TSA, we interviewed the National Advisory Council, which represents employees by collecting employee views through quarterly outreach efforts and making recommendations to leadership; the Human Capital Advisory Group, which provides employee feedback to leadership; and the Inclusion Action Committee and Diversity and Inclusion Change Agents Council, which focus on diversity, equity, and inclusion issues.

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<sup>2</sup>TSOs report to Supervisory TSOs and Transportation Security Managers, whom we refer to as supervisors and managers, respectively, throughout our report. Some TSOs—referred to as Lead TSOs—have responsibilities such as distributing and adjusting TSO workload and tasks. Lead TSOs oversee, but do not supervise, other TSOs.

We also interviewed TSA national representatives for the American Federation of Government Employees, which is the union for TSOs. In addition to these national-level groups, we also interviewed representatives from employee groups at each airport we visited. This included Employee Advisory Councils, comprised of TSOs who work with management to address workplace concerns, diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility groups, and airport representatives for the American Federation of Government Employees.<sup>3</sup>

To identify the key drivers of TSO engagement, we used the results of our regression analysis supplemented by other information we collected. Specifically, we used the results of our regression analysis to identify the top issues driving TSO engagement. We then considered these top issues (identified in FEVS questions) in light of other information we gathered, notably our interviews with employee groups and TSOs. For additional information about how we identified the key drivers, see appendix III.

To address our second objective, we reviewed agency documentation and interviewed TSA officials about the agency's past, ongoing, and planned efforts to improve employee engagement. We reviewed TSA's 2021 and 2023 EEAPs, which describe planned actions to improve employee engagement nationwide; related goals, performance measures, targets, and results; and TSA's FEVS results from 2020 through 2023.<sup>4</sup> In addition, we reviewed information TSA used to inform its 2021 and 2023 EEAP. For example, we reviewed TSA documentation describing the analysis of its focus group results. For additional information about TSA's performance goals, measures, targets, and results, see appendix IV.

We then reviewed TSA documentation describing how and the extent that TSA had implemented its planned actions. We reviewed performance management guidance and job performance requirements for TSOs,

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<sup>3</sup>In our interviews, when discussing challenges related to employee engagement, some TSOs, airport leadership, and employee groups used the more general and familiar term employee "morale." Where such comments pertained to employee engagement, we use the term engagement for clarity and consistency throughout our report.

<sup>4</sup>TSA's record-level FEVS results for 2023 were not available at the time we conducted our regression analysis. In October 2023, DHS provided us with the DHS and TSA 2023 FEVS results they obtained from OPM. These results did not include the record-level data we would need to conduct our regression analysis, but rather provided insight into the 2023 FEVS results government-wide, and for both DHS and TSA. We incorporated this 2023 FEVS data where appropriate in our report to provide the most up-to-date information.

Supervisory TSOs, managers, and senior leadership; required and elective training courses offered to TSOs; action plans to improve employee engagement at local airports; individual and airport-level results from TSA's leadership surveys; and information on officer retention incentives.<sup>5</sup> We also reviewed TSA's strategic plan and the TSA Administrator's Intent 3.0 document to determine how the agency's actions fit within its wider priorities.<sup>6</sup>

To understand the extent to which TSA's actions address key drivers of TSO engagement, we interviewed TSA human capital officials in headquarters, TSO employee groups, and TSA employees at the five selected airports about TSA's local and nationwide efforts to improve TSO engagement. We evaluated TSA's actions against DHS guidance for developing EEAPs and TSA guidance for employees and airports receiving survey feedback.<sup>7</sup> For information about other actions TSA has taken to address additional areas that they determined to affect employee engagement, see appendix V.

We conducted this performance audit from June 2022 to February 2024, 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.

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<sup>5</sup>TSA leadership at headquarters has required leadership at airports that receive FEVS results to submit an annual Local Action Plan. TSA human capital officials told us they asserted this requirement by including language in all Federal Security Director performance plans requiring that they develop a Local Action Plan based on FEVS results.

<sup>6</sup>TSA, *TSA Strategy 2018-2026* and TSA, *Administrator's Intent 3.0* (July 2023).

<sup>7</sup>DHS, Office of the Chief Human Capital Officer, *Employee Engagement Action Plan Guidance* (April 2022). This guidance provides a framework for component-level employee engagement action planning. We also reviewed examples of reports providing 2021 TSA Leadership for Engagement survey results to individuals and specific airports. These reports include guidance on steps to be taken by TSA leaders and airports receiving feedback results.

# Appendix II: Analysis of the Drivers of Transportation Security Officer Engagement

This appendix describes our methodology for determining the key drivers of Transportation Security Officer (TSO) engagement—an employee’s sense of purpose in their job.

To identify the drivers of TSO engagement, we analyzed Office of Personnel Management (OPM) Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey (FEVS) data from the 2022 administration of the survey. Specifically, we used an ordinary least squares regression to assess the association between potential driver questions and the Employee Engagement Index (EEI), controlling for other factors such as employee characteristics.

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## Scope and Data Source

The scope of our analysis included all TSOs who completed the FEVS in 2022. The 2022 FEVS was conducted as a census administered to approximately 43,271 TSOs. We isolated the 14,223 TSO responses from the rest of Transportation Security Administration (TSA) employee responses by analyzing only the 1802 job series, which is the federal position classification for the TSO position, including Lead and Supervisory TSOs. The response rate for TSOs was 33 percent.

While OPM calculates one aggregate EEI score at the group level, we used the data from OPM to recalculate the EEI for each individual respondent. This allows us to control for different variables because we can associate an individual’s EEI score with how they answered other questions. The individual level calculation is scaled between 0 and 100 and is based on the proportion of each individual’s positive responses to the 15 constituent EEI questions. The 15 questions that make up the EEI are listed in the body of this report. We considered a positive response to these questions to be “Strongly Agree/Very Satisfied” or “Agree/Satisfied” responses to a FEVS question. Non-positive responses include “Neither Agree nor Disagree/Neither Satisfied nor Dissatisfied,” “Disagree/Dissatisfied,” or “Strongly Disagree/Very Dissatisfied” responses to a FEVS question.



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## Identification of OPM FEVS Questions

To determine the FEVS questions to include in our statistical models, we used our prior work from 2015 and 2021 identifying potential drivers of employee engagement and FEVS questions that serve as proxies for those drivers.<sup>1</sup> Our prior work included 18 FEVS questions that could be potential drivers of engagement.<sup>2</sup> We chose to test the same questions in the current analysis to the extent possible. In five cases where a potential driver question was no longer part of the FEVS, we selected another, similar question.<sup>3</sup> In addition, we ensured that one driver question related to each of diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility was included in our final model.<sup>4</sup> Finally, we included a variable for disability status that was not included in the regression model presented in our prior work.<sup>5</sup> Table 1 shows the 19 FEVS driver questions we ultimately selected for inclusion in our regression model.

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<sup>1</sup>GAO, *Federal Workforce: Additional Analysis and Sharing of Promising Practices Could Improve Employee Engagement and Performance*, [GAO-15-585](#) (Washington, D.C.: July 14, 2015). Also see GAO, *DHS Employee Morale: Some Improvements Made, but Additional Actions Needed to Strengthen Employee Engagement*, [GAO-21-204](#), (Washington, D.C.: Jan. 12, 2021).

<sup>2</sup>Our prior work reviewed relevant literature and interviewed knowledgeable researchers, government officials from the United Kingdom, Canada, and Australia responsible for the comparable public-sector employee survey, and consultants on employee engagement to identify potential drivers of employee engagement. We then selected at least one FEVS question as a proxy for each of the potential drivers that we identified. The questions that we selected were those we determined to be the most actionable by managers and representative of the potential driver. We also selected three drivers and questions related to fair and equitable treatment.

<sup>3</sup>For example, the question “Supervisors work well with employees of different backgrounds” was the second highest driver for TSA in 2019, but it was not asked in 2022. The associated question that we selected from the current version of the survey was “My supervisor demonstrates a commitment to workforce diversity (e.g., recruitment, promotion opportunities, development).”

<sup>4</sup>In the 2022 FEVS, there were several questions that were asked in each of the four categories in the OPM’s Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Accessibility Index. This Index addresses employee perceptions of policies and practices related to diversity, equity, and inclusion in their agency and how well the agency meets accessibility needs. We selected one question from each of the four sets of questions. To do this, we ran bivariate regression models of the EEI scores on each of the individual questions and selected the one whose regression coefficient was the highest in value from their respective subsections of the Index.

<sup>5</sup>[GAO-21-204](#).

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**Table 1: 2022 Federal Employment Viewpoint Survey Questions Included in GAO's Regression Model**

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**Question**

- Question 1: I am given a real opportunity to improve my skills in my organization.
- Question 5: My workload is reasonable.
- Question 8: I can disclose a suspected violation of any law, rule or regulation without fear of reprisal.
- Question 14: The people I work with cooperate to get the job done.
- Question 16: In my work unit, differences in performance are recognized in a meaningful way.
- Question 18: My work unit has the job-relevant knowledge and skills necessary to accomplish organizational goals.
- Question 26: My work unit commits resources to develop new ideas (e.g., budget, staff, time, expert support).
- Question 42: In my organization, arbitrary action, personal favoritism and/or political coercion are not tolerated.
- Question 44: I believe the results of this survey will be used to make my agency a better place to work.
- Question 47: My supervisor supports my need to balance work and other life issues.
- Question 53: My supervisor provides me with constructive suggestions to improve my job performance.
- Question 62: Management encourages innovation.
- Question 65: How satisfied are you with your involvement in decisions that affect your work?
- Question 66: How satisfied are you with the information you receive from management on what's going on in your organization?
- Question 69: Considering everything, how satisfied are you with your pay?
- Question 72: My supervisor demonstrates a commitment to workforce diversity (e.g., recruitment, promotion opportunities, development).
- Question 75: In my work unit, excellent work is similarly recognized for all employees (e.g., awards, acknowledgements).
- Question 81: I can be successful in my organization being myself.
- Question 83: My organization responds to my accessibility needs in a timely manner.

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Source: GAO analysis of Office of Personnel Management data and documents. | GAO-24-106052

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## Statistical Tests and Final Model Specification

Using this record level FEVS data for 2022, we developed a multivariate linear regression model to assess the association between our selected

driver questions and the EEI, controlling for other variables such as employee demographics.<sup>6</sup>

To determine the final model specification, we performed diagnostic tests to avoid any confounding issues and problems with multi-collinearity. First, we ran a series of bivariate regression models of EEI on each one of the driver variables as well as the 10 demographic variables that we initially considered.<sup>7</sup> Demographic variables that did not have a statistically significant coefficient at the p-value < 0.05 level were excluded from further inclusion in our modeling effort. The specific variables excluded in this step were sex, education, work location, and prior military service. Second, we examined a correlation matrix for all candidate variables to examine and ensure the independence of each variable.

Third, we ran a full multivariate regression model that included all drivers selected for inclusion in analysis, as well as the demographic variables that had a statistically significant bivariate regression coefficient. Demographic variables whose coefficient estimates were non-significant at the p-value < 0.05 level were then excluded. The variables excluded at this point were race/Hispanic origin and agency tenure.<sup>8</sup> Last, we ran a final multivariate model that included only the demographic variables with statistically significant coefficient estimates in the first full model.<sup>9</sup> The results of this multivariate regression model appear in Table 2 of appendix III.

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<sup>6</sup>According to TSA, as of September 2023, 58 percent of the TSO workforce identified as male and 42 percent as female. The average age of this workforce is 41, and the average length of service is 7.9 years. TSA identifies 37 percent as White, 26 percent Hispanic or Latino, 26 percent Black or African American, 7 percent Asian, 1 percent Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander, 1 percent American Indian or Alaskan Native, and 1 percent as two or more race or ethnicities.

<sup>7</sup>We controlled for the following demographic variables: education, sex, prior military service, work location, race and Hispanic origin, agency tenure, disability status, age, plans to leave TSA, and supervisor status. Except for disability status, these are the same variables we controlled for in previous work, see [GAO-21-204](#).

<sup>8</sup>We combined four race and ethnicity variables into one variable during bivariate testing. This combined category includes the options "Non-Hispanic White," "Hispanic/Latino," "Non-Hispanic Minority," and "Non-Hispanic 2 or more races".

<sup>9</sup>OPM provided us survey weights that they generated based on response rates and adjusted for response bias analysis. We applied OPM's final weights in our model.

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## Limitations

We selected the questions to include in our model based on our 2015 review of academic, government, and policy-related literature and a logical assessment of the particular concepts with which they related.<sup>10</sup> However, researchers may disagree over which FEVS questions provide the best and most actionable proxies for the drivers we identified. In some cases, multiple questions relate to the same concept.<sup>11</sup> Had we selected different questions as proxies for drivers found in the literature, our results may have been different.

The FEVS was not initially designed with the express purpose of measuring engagement or of identifying factors related to engagement. To the extent policymakers seek to use data to assess drivers of engagement, leading practices suggest designing a survey or questions to align expressly with the concepts of interest. Additionally, according to OPM, EEI does not measure engagement directly. Instead, it measures the conditions that lead to engaged employees.

Our model is not a causal assessment of the relationship between the specific FEVS questions included in our model and increased employee engagement. While our results identify some areas that might relate to increased engagement, we cannot be certain that an improvement in a specific driver will result in increases in employee engagement.

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<sup>10</sup>[GAO-15-585](#).

<sup>11</sup>For example, the questions “I receive the training I need to do my job well” and “New hires in my work unit (i.e., hired in the past year) have the right skills to do their jobs” both relate to the driver “Providing opportunities to improve skills.” However, we selected a different question (“I am given a real opportunity to improve my skills in my organization”) to represent this driver in our model.

## Appendix III: Results of GAO's Analysis of the Drivers of Transportation Security Officer Employee Engagement

This appendix describes the results of our analysis of the key drivers of Transportation Security Officer (TSO) engagement—an employees' sense of purpose in their job.

Using record level data from the 2022 Office of Personnel Management's (OPM) Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey (FEVS), we used ordinary least squares multivariate linear regression analysis to assess the association between potential driver questions and the Employee Engagement Index (EEI), controlling for other factors such as employee characteristics. OPM conducted the 2022 FEVS as a census administered to approximately 43,271 TSOs) with 14,223 responding. The response rate for TSOs was 33 percent.

The coefficients listed for the FEVS questions in table 2 indicate the magnitude of the positive association with the EEI when a survey respondent provided a positive response to the question compared to a respondent who did not provide a positive response. The non-positive responses serve as the reference variable. Positive responses include "Strongly Agree/Very Satisfied" or "Agree/Satisfied" responses to a FEVS question. Non-positive responses include "Neither Agree nor Disagree/Neither Satisfied nor Dissatisfied," "Disagree/Dissatisfied," or "Strongly Disagree/Very Dissatisfied" responses to a FEVS question.

Given the large number of respondents in our analysis, many of the coefficients of the drivers in the model were statistically significant. Accordingly, we incorporated a substantive threshold in our determination of whether an independent variable was a key driver of TSO engagement to distinguish it from other variables. We considered variables to be key drivers of engagement if they had a coefficient of .05 or higher, indicating that on average, moving from a negative response to a positive response was associated with at least a 5 percentage point increase in the 0 to 100

**Appendix III: Results of GAO’s Analysis of the Drivers of Transportation Security Officer Employee Engagement**

scale.<sup>1</sup> These factors identify drivers that, if improved, would be more likely to improve employee engagement than other factors. See table 2 for these questions and their regression coefficients.

All our independent variables for this analysis were categorical in nature, meaning each, in both sets of independent variables—the FEVS questions that comprise the drivers and the demographic variables—was comprised of mutually exclusive categories. For our regression models we identified one of these categories as our baseline reference category for each factor. A reference category of a categorical factor in a regression model is the value against which the other categories of the factor specified in the model are compared. For example, the variable concerning respondents’ intentions to leave had as its reference category “No” (not intending to leave), with the other reference categories, “Yes, to retire,” “Yes, to take another job within the Federal Government,” “Yes, to take another job outside the Federal Government,” and “Yes, other,” being compared against the reference category.

For both of our sets of independent variables—the FEVS questions that comprise the drivers and the demographic variables—there was a specific portion of missing responses. To retain the individuals in our model who did not respond to one or more of the questions in these two sets of variables, we categorized their missing responses in the “reference” category for each of these variables. For example, in the above-mentioned intention to leave variable, non-responses were categorized into the reference category, which indicated no intent to leave.

**Table 2: Regression Results for Transportation Security Officers**

Question/Variable	Estimated coefficient	P-Values
My supervisor provides me with constructive suggestions to improve my job performance. (Question 53)	0.106	<.0001
I am given a real opportunity to improve my skills in my organization. (Question 1)	0.101	<.0001
My supervisor supports my need to balance work and other life issues. (Question 47)	0.090	<.0001

<sup>1</sup>The top six survey questions were “My supervisor provides me with constructive suggestions to improve my job performance,” “I am given a real opportunity to improve my skills in my organization,” “My supervisor supports my need to balance work and other life issues,” “Management encourages innovation,” “My work unit has the job-relevant knowledge and skills necessary to accomplish organizational goals,” and “How satisfied are you with the information you receive from management on what’s going on in your organization?”

**Appendix III: Results of GAO's Analysis of the Drivers of Transportation Security Officer Employee Engagement**

<b>Question/Variable</b>	<b>Estimated coefficient</b>	<b>P-Values</b>
Management encourages innovation. (Question 62)	0.085	<.0001
My work unit has the job-relevant knowledge and skills necessary to accomplish organizational goals. (Question 18)	0.064	<.0001
How satisfied are you with the information you receive from management on what's going on in your organization? (Question 66)	0.061	<.0001
My workload is reasonable. (Question 5)	0.049	<.0001
I can disclose a suspected violation of any law, rule or regulation without fear of reprisal. (Question 8)	0.046	<.0001
The people I work with cooperate to get the job done. (Question 14)	0.038	<.0001
My supervisor demonstrates a commitment to workforce diversity (e.g., recruitment, promotion opportunities, development). (Question 72)	0.037	<.0001
I can be successful in my organization being myself. (Question 81)	0.036	<.0001
I believe the results of this survey will be used to make my agency a better place to work. (Question 44)	0.030	<.0001
How satisfied are you with your involvement in decisions that affect your work? (Question 65)	0.025	<.0001
In my work unit, excellent work is similarly recognized for all employees (e.g., awards, acknowledgements). (Question 75)	0.022	<.0001
In my work unit, differences in performance are recognized in a meaningful way. (Question 16)	0.020	<.0001
In my organization, arbitrary action, personal favoritism and/or political coercion are not tolerated. (Question 42)	0.020	<.0001
My work unit commits resources to develop new ideas (e.g., budget, staff, time, expert support). (Question 26)	0.017	<.0001
My organization responds to my accessibility needs in a timely manner. (Question 83)	0.011	<.0001
Considering everything, how satisfied are you with your pay? (Question 69)	NS	NS
Supervisory status: Non-Supervisor	Ref.	
Supervisory status: Supervisor	-0.018	<.0001
Intent to leave: No	Ref.	
Intent to leave: Yes, to retire	-0.029	<.0001
Intent to leave: Yes, to take another job within the Federal Government	-0.032	<.0001
Intent to leave: Yes, to take another job outside the Federal Government	-0.056	<.0001
Intent to leave: Yes, other	-0.041	<.0001
Age: Under 40	Ref.	
Age: 40 or older	-0.007	0.0068
Disability status: Yes	0.041	<.0001
Disability status: No	Ref.	

Legend: NS = question was found to be not significant at the 0.05 significance level; Ref. = the reference category against which the other categories of that factor are compared; R2 = .76; Number of observations = 14,223

Source: GAO analysis of 2022 Office of Personnel Management data. | GAO-24-106052

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**Appendix III: Results of GAO's Analysis of the  
Drivers of Transportation Security Officer  
Employee Engagement**

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Note: Model is a weighted least squares regression with the GAO-constructed employee engagement index as the dependent variable and linear specifications of drivers with non-responses categorized in the reference categories. Positive coefficients reflect increases in positivity. We incorporated a substantive threshold in our determination of whether an independent variable acted as a key driver. We considered variables to be drivers of engagement if they had a coefficient of .05 or higher, indicating that on average, moving from a negative response to a positive response was associated with at least a 5 percentage point increase in the 0 to 100 scale.

To name our five key drivers, each of the six questions with the highest association (the coefficient estimate) with EEI served as a starting point which we then supplemented with information from interviews with employee groups and TSOs.<sup>2</sup> For example, to name the “managing and recognizing employee performance” driver, we started with the FEVS question “My supervisor provides me with constructive suggestions to improve my job performance” and broadened it based on the information we gathered during interviews with employee groups and TSOs. We did this for the six top driver questions to create five key drivers based on our evidence. We present five key drivers because we combined two closely related questions into one driver, “providing opportunities for career development.”<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>Given our approach, the specific names of the drivers we identified differ from a standardized list of drivers OPM has identified and which TSA officials have referenced in some of their analyses.

<sup>3</sup>These questions are “I am given a real opportunity to improve my skills in my organization” and “My work unit has the job-relevant knowledge and skills necessary to accomplish organizational goals.”



# Appendix IV: Transportation Security Administration's Performance Goals, Measures, and Results for Improving Employee Engagement

This appendix describes the Transportation Security Administration's (TSA) goals, measures, and results for its efforts to improve employee engagement—an employees' sense of purpose in their job.

While TSA did not meet any of the goals in its 2021 action plan for improving TSA employee engagement, the agency met all the interim goals in its 2023 action plan. Specifically, TSA's 2021 Employee Engagement Action Plan (EEAP) included three goals for improving TSA employee engagement, each of which included 2-year performance measures and targets. According to its documentation, TSA took specific actions related to each goal in its 2021 action plan but did not meet any of its goals for improving employee engagement.

The goals in TSA's 2023 EEAP largely focused on continuing the initiatives in its 2021 EEAP. TSA retained the same 2-year performance measures and targets and added interim 1-year performance targets. TSA met each of its 1-year interim targets, based on improvements from 2022 to 2023.

The first goal was to improve leadership TSA-wide.<sup>1</sup> To address this goal, TSA began administering the Leadership for Engagement survey in 2021 to gather and report employee views on the performance of their first-, second-, and third-line supervisors. Administering this survey did not lead to the target level of improvement in employee perceptions of leadership

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<sup>1</sup>All three of TSA's EEAP goals, performance measures, and targets relate to all TSA employees, not Transportation Security Officers (TSO) specifically.

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**Appendix IV: Transportation Security  
Administration's Performance Goals,  
Measures, and Results for Improving  
Employee Engagement**

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from 2020 to 2022, as set by TSA in its 2021 EEAP.<sup>2</sup> Specifically, 2022 data from the Office of Personnel Management's (OPM) Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey (FEVS) indicate that the percent of TSA employees satisfied with their leadership decreased from 51 percent to 46 percent during this time. TSA retained the goal of improving leadership in its 2023 EEAP, and the percent of TSA employees satisfied with their leadership increased from 46 percent in 2022 to 54 percent in 2023, according to FEVS results provided by DHS.<sup>3</sup> This 8 percentage point increase exceeded TSA's target level of 2 percent improvement. Figure 8 shows the results for this goal and its two associated performance measures.

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<sup>2</sup>Specifically, TSA's target was to observe in 2022 a 3 percent improvement from 2020 FEVS scores for both the Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey (FEVS) Leaders Lead Index and the Supervisor Index, both of which gauge employee perceptions of leadership. The Leaders Lead Index uses five survey questions that reflect the employees' perceptions of the integrity of leadership, as well as leadership behaviors such as communication and workforce motivation. The Supervisors Index uses five survey questions that reflect the interpersonal relationship between worker and supervisor, including trust, respect, and support.

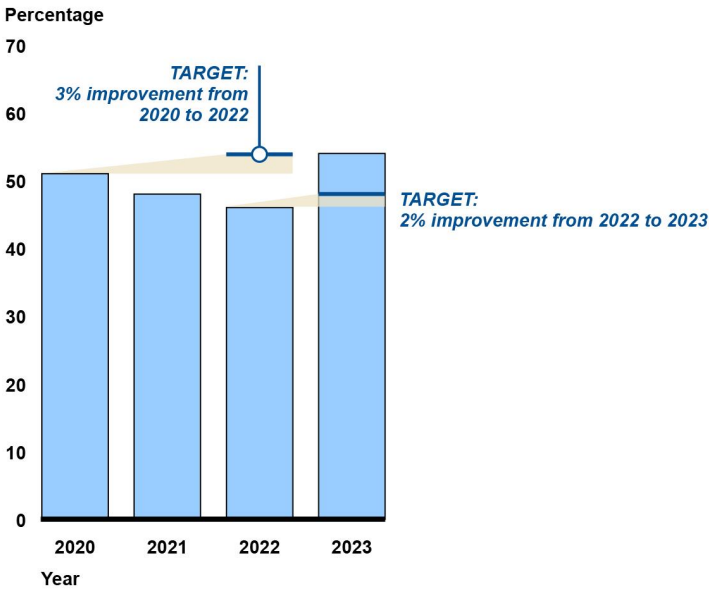
<sup>3</sup>According to TSA officials, the first and second cycle of the 2023 survey was launched in February and September 2023, respectively.

Appendix IV: Transportation Security Administration's Performance Goals, Measures, and Results for Improving Employee Engagement

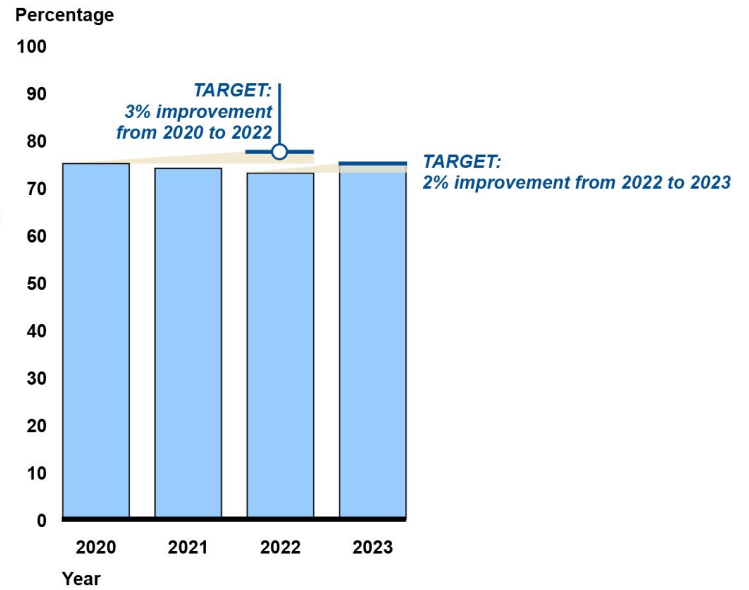
Figure 8: TSA's Performance Goal, Measures, and Results for Improving Leadership from 2020 through 2023

**GOAL:**  
Continue to improve leadership TSA-wide

**PERFORMANCE MEASURE:**  
Employee perceptions of leadership<sup>a</sup>



**PERFORMANCE MEASURE:**  
Employee perceptions of supervisors<sup>b</sup>



Source: GAO analysis of Transportation Security Administration (TSA) data. | GAO-24-106052

**Accessible Data for Figure 8: TSA's Performance Goal, Measures, and Results for Improving Leadership from 2020 through 2023**

**PERFORMANCE MEASURE: Employee perceptions of leadership<sup>a</sup>**

Year	Employee perceptions of leadership <sup>a</sup> (percentage)	Target (percentage)	Improvement (percentage)
2020	51		3% improvement from 2020 to 2022
2021	48		
2022	46	54	2% improvement from 2022 to 2023
2023	54	48	

**PERFORMANCE MEASURE: Employee perceptions of supervisors<sup>b</sup>**

Year	Employee perceptions of supervisors <sup>b</sup> (percentage)	Target (percentage)	Improvement (percentage)
2020	75		3% improvement from 2020 to 2022
2021	74		
2022	73	78	2% improvement from 2022 to 2023
2023	75	75	

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**Appendix IV: Transportation Security Administration's Performance Goals, Measures, and Results for Improving Employee Engagement**

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Source: GAO analysis of Transportation Security Administration (TSA) data. | GAO-24-106052

Note: Each of TSA's performance measures use data from the Office of Personnel Management's (OPM) Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey (FEVS). The performance results indicate the percent of respondents who selected positive responses to survey questions ("Strongly Agree" or "Agree," or "Very good" or "Good").

<sup>a</sup>Specifically, TSA measured the Leaders Lead Index within the FEVS. This index uses five survey questions that reflect the employees' perceptions of the integrity of leadership, as well as leadership behaviors such as communication and workforce motivation.

<sup>b</sup>Specifically, TSA measured the Supervisors Index within the FEVS. This index uses five survey questions that reflect the interpersonal relationship between worker and supervisor, including trust, respect, and support.

The second goal in the 2021 EEAP was to improve workforce compensation and rewards for outstanding accomplishments. To address this goal, TSA implemented the TSO Career Progression Program, TSO service pay, and the Model Officer Recognition Program, as described in this report. However, these actions did not lead to TSA's target level of improvement in employee satisfaction with pay from 2020 to 2022.<sup>4</sup> Rather, FEVS data indicate that the percent of TSA employees satisfied with their pay decreased from 32 percent to 21 percent during this time frame. In its 2023 EEAP, TSA narrowed this goal from improving workforce compensation and rewards for outstanding accomplishments to improving employee satisfaction with pay.<sup>5</sup> FEVS data provided by DHS indicate that TSA employee satisfaction with pay increased from 21 percent in 2022 to 44 percent in 2023. This 23 percentage point increase exceeded TSA's target level of 3 percent improvement by 2023, as shown in figure 9.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup>Specifically, TSA's target was to observe in 2022, a 2 percent increase in positive responses to the FEVS question "Considering everything, how satisfied are you with your pay?"

<sup>5</sup>At the time TSA employees completed the 2023 FEVS survey in mid-2023, Congress had appropriated funding for the July 2023 pay raise, but TSA employees had not yet received it. See appendix V for additional information about this pay increase.

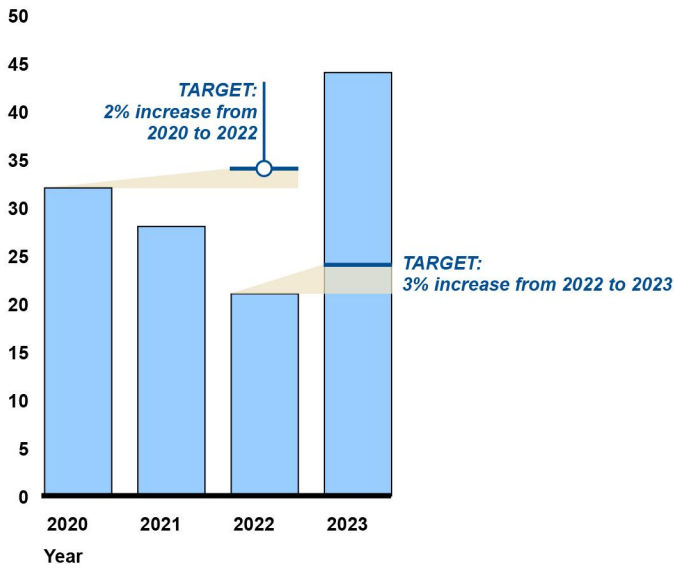
<sup>6</sup>According to its 2023 EEAP, TSA will also monitor the effect of the pay increase on employee retention. Specifically, TSA expects to see sustained 10 percent improvements to retention for all employees, including TSOs, each year, relative to fiscal year 2022, from fiscal year 2022 through fiscal year 2025. Based on preliminary data, TSA officials said they anticipate they will meet this target for improving retention by 10 percent from fiscal year 2022 to 2023.

Appendix IV: Transportation Security Administration's Performance Goals, Measures, and Results for Improving Employee Engagement

Figure 9: TSA's Performance Goal, Measure, and Results for Improving Compensation from 2020 through 2023

**GOAL:**  
Improve workforce compensation

**PERFORMANCE MEASURE:**  
Employee satisfaction with pay<sup>a</sup>  
Percentage



Source: GAO analysis of Transportation Security Administration (TSA) data. | GAO-24-106052

Accessible Data for Figure 9: TSA's Performance Goal, Measure, and Results for Improving Compensation from 2020 through 2023

**PERFORMANCE MEASURE: Employee satisfaction with pay<sup>a</sup>**

Year	Employee satisfaction with pay <sup>a</sup> (percentage)	Target (percentage)	Increase (percentage)
2020	32		2% increase from 2020 to 2022
2021	28		
2022	21	34	3% increase from 2022 to 2023
2023	44	24	

Source: GAO analysis of Transportation Security Administration (TSA) data. | GAO-24-106052

Note: Each of TSA's performance measures use data from the Office of Personnel Management's (OPM) Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey (FEVS). The performance results indicate the percent of respondents who selected positive responses to survey questions ("Very Satisfied" or "Satisfied").

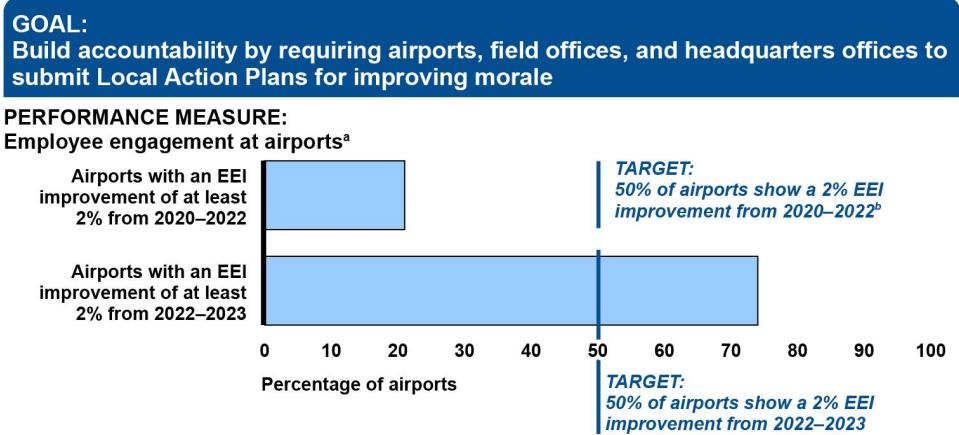
<sup>a</sup>Specifically, TSA measured the results of the FEVS question "Considering everything, how satisfied are you with your pay?"

The third goal in the 2021 EEAP was to build accountability for improving employee engagement. To address this goal, TSA required airports that

**Appendix IV: Transportation Security Administration’s Performance Goals, Measures, and Results for Improving Employee Engagement**

receive FEVS results to submit Local Action Plans to address issues they identified in the 2020 FEVS results. Local Action Plans, as discussed in this report, are used to identify areas for improvement at individual airports. However, these actions did not lead to TSA’s target of 2 percent improvement in Employee Engagement Index (EEI) scores at 50 percent of airports required to submit a Local Action Plan from 2020 to 2022. Rather, TSA data indicate that 21 percent of airports that submitted Local Action Plans had increased their EEI scores by 2 percent during this time frame. TSA retained this same goal in its 2023 EEAP. FEVS data indicate that 74 percent of airports that submitted Local Action Plans improved their EEI scores by 2 percent or more from 2022 to 2023, according to FEVS data provided by TSA. This exceeded TSA’s target level of improvement, as shown in figure 10.

**Figure 10: TSA’s Performance Goal, Measure, and Results for Building Accountability from 2020 through 2023**



Source: GAO analysis of Transportation Security Administration (TSA) data. | GAO-24-106052

**Accessible Data for Figure 10: TSA’s Performance Goal, Measure, and Results for Building Accountability from 2020 through 2023**

**PERFORMANCE MEASURE: Employee engagement at airports<sup>a</sup>**

Category	Employee engagement at airports <sup>a</sup>	Target
Airports with an EEI improvement of at least 2% from 2020–2022	21	50% of airports show a 2% EEI improvement from 2020–2022 <sup>b</sup>
Airports with an EEI improvement of at least 2% from 2022–2023	74	50% of airports show a 2% EEI improvement from 2022–2023

Source: GAO analysis of Transportation Security Administration (TSA) data. | GAO-24-106052

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**Appendix IV: Transportation Security  
Administration's Performance Goals,  
Measures, and Results for Improving  
Employee Engagement**

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Note: Each of TSA's performance measures use data from the Office of Personnel Management's (OPM) Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey (FEVS).

<sup>a</sup>Specifically, TSA analyzed the Employee Engagement Index (EEI) within the FEVS. The Employee Engagement Index uses 15 survey questions that measure conditions that are conducive to employee engagement.

<sup>b</sup>TSA has required all airports that receive FEVS results to submit Local Action Plans annually since 2020, except in 2022 when the prior year's airport-specific FEVS results were not available.

# Appendix V: Additional Transportation Security Administration Actions to Improve Employee Engagement

This appendix describes actions the Transportation Security Administration (TSA) has taken to address additional challenges that they determined affect employee engagement—an employee’s sense of purpose in their job. These include increasing pay and compensation, providing new personnel appeal rights, and expanding collective bargaining rights.

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## Increasing Pay and Compensation

In December 2022, Congress passed the Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2023, which provided nearly \$8.8 billion for TSA, including over \$397 million for personnel system changes and over \$60 million for new Transportation Security Officer (TSO) hiring.<sup>1</sup> In July 2023, TSA instituted pay increases for most employees. According to TSA, these changes modernized the agency’s pay structure, making it more comparable to federal employees on the General Schedule pay scale.<sup>2</sup> Information TSA

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<sup>1</sup>Pub. L. No. 117-328, Div. F, Tit. II, 136 Stat. 4459, 4731; Explanatory Statement Regarding the Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2023, 168 Cong. Rec. S8562-S8563 (daily ed. Dec. 20, 2022).

<sup>2</sup>Following the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, the Aviation and Transportation Security Act created TSA, and gave the TSA Administrator broad authority to employ, appoint, discipline, terminate, and fix the compensation, terms, and conditions of employment for TSOs. Aviation and Transportation Security Act, Pub. L. No. 107-71, § 111(d), 115 Stat. 597, 620 (2001) (codified at 49 U.S.C. § 44935 note (Screener Personnel)). In doing so, the act excluded TSOs from the General Schedule pay scale and Title 5 personnel system under which most federal employees are classified. As a result, TSO pay and other personnel policies have not historically been comparable with most other federal employees in the executive branch.



provided shows that TSOs received a pay raise of \$10,974 (22 percent), on average.<sup>3</sup>

Prior to these changes, TSA had implemented various programs and incentives to increase TSO pay and compensation, including across the board, targeted, and performance-based increases. TSA discontinued or reformed each of these programs following the July 2023 pay increase.

- **TSO service pay:** In February 2021, TSA provided across-the-board pay increases of 1 to 2 percent for TSOs who were employed at TSA for 12 months. TSA discontinued this program following the July 2023 pay increase.
- **Programs to reward performance:** In January and March 2021, TSA implemented two agency-wide programs to encourage skills development and reward TSO performance with additional compensation—Model Officer Recognition and Career Progression, respectively. TSA discontinued the Career Progression E3 pay increase and made changes to Model Officer Recognition pay increases in July 2023. (These programs are discussed further in the body of this report.)
- **Retention incentives:** In November 2015, TSA began providing retention incentives to TSOs at certain airports that face challenges hiring or retaining employees. According to TSA documentation, human capital officials identified these airports based on considerations such as low unemployment, competitive salaries offered by other employers, cost of living, and hard-to-hire locations. TSA data indicate that as of September 2023, TSA was providing TSOs at 54 airports with retention incentives.<sup>4</sup> TSA human capital officials told us that TSA will continue to evaluate the need for retention incentives over time, and they expect TSOs at many hard-to-hire airports will continue to receive these incentives.

Senior TSA leadership, representatives from employee groups, and TSOs we met with widely stated that pay affected TSO job satisfaction. In testimony to Congress in May 2022, the TSA Administrator stated that TSA had struggled with recruitment and retention because of TSO

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<sup>3</sup>This calculation includes TSOs, Lead TSOs and Supervisory TSOs. When broken out, TSOs and Lead TSOs received a pay raise of \$10,049 (21 percent), on average, and Supervisory TSOs received a pay raise of \$18,896 (29 percent), on average.

<sup>4</sup>According to TSA data, TSOs at 143 airports were receiving retention incentives as of September 2022, and TSOs at 54 airports were receiving retention incentives as of September 2023 following the July 2023 pay increase.

dissatisfaction with pay.<sup>5</sup> In addition, two national employee groups and employee groups at three airports we visited said that pay was an important factor that affected TSO morale. TSOs at one airport noted that many TSOs had second jobs or needed to work overtime to cover their expenses.

Data from the Office of Personnel Management's (OPM) 2023 Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey (FEVS) provided by the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) indicate that the percent of TSA employees satisfied with their pay increased from 21 percent in 2022 to 44 percent in 2023.<sup>6</sup> Accordingly, TSA's score on the FEVS Global Satisfaction Index, which includes pay satisfaction, increased from 39 percent in 2022 to 54 percent in 2023. TSA headquarters officials attributed this increase to employees' anticipation of the agency's July 2023 pay increase, which TSA had announced but not yet implemented when the 2023 FEVS was administered. TSA human capital officials also said that implementing the pay increase had helped reduce employee attrition.

These results indicate that increasing TSO pay could address one important source of their dissatisfaction. However, our analysis suggests that increasing TSO pay satisfaction may not directly improve their engagement—the employee's sense of purpose in their job that is evident in their display of dedication, persistence, and effort displayed in their work. Specifically, our analysis of 2022 FEVS survey results shows that pay satisfaction was not a driver of TSO employee engagement. We found that when included with other drivers of engagement in our multivariate regression model, pay satisfaction's association with the Employee Engagement Index (EEI) was smaller than all other drivers and not statistically significant.<sup>7</sup> In other words, dissatisfaction with pay did not

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<sup>5</sup>David P. Pekoske, TSA Administrator, Washington, DC, *Fiscal Year 2023 Budget Request for the Transportation Security Administration*, testimony before the House Committee on Appropriations Subcommittee on Homeland Security, May 18, 2022.

<sup>6</sup>These percentages include all TSA employees and are not limited to TSOs.

<sup>7</sup>Similarly, in 2021, we found that pay was not a driver of employee engagement for TSA employees. In that analysis of 2019 FEVS results we found that TSA employee satisfaction with pay had a statistically significant relationship with an individual's EEI score, but this relationship did not meet our substantive threshold to be considered a driver of engagement. Pay satisfaction had the weakest association with engagement out of the 18 potential drivers we tested. See [GAO-21-204](#).

appear to be influencing engagement.<sup>8</sup> This could be explained by the way pay affects employee engagement and job satisfaction differently. Some social science research has shown that pay can affect employee satisfaction or contentment with their job but does not generally improve employee engagement or motivation.<sup>9</sup> Some social science research also suggests that employee engagement and job satisfaction are different experiences.<sup>10</sup>

OPM distinguishes between the two concepts of employee engagement and job satisfaction by calculating a FEVS Global Satisfaction Index separately from the EEI. The Global Satisfaction Index combines the results of four FEVS questions gauging employees' satisfaction with their job, their pay, and their organization, plus their willingness to recommend their organization as a good place to work. When OPM developed these two indices, they determined that pay related more to satisfaction than to engagement and made the question "Considering everything, how satisfied are you with your pay?" one of four items that make up the Global Satisfaction Index.<sup>11</sup> OPM did not include this question about pay in the EEI. Consistent with this, the Global Satisfaction Index (which includes but is not limited to pay satisfaction) increased 15 percentage points, and EEI (which does not include pay satisfaction) increased 4 percentage points during this timeframe.

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<sup>8</sup>As part of our initial testing of the associations between our driver questions and EEI, we ran separate bivariate models of EEI on each of the driver questions, including the question "Considering everything, how satisfied are you with your pay?" In our bivariate model regressing EEI on pay satisfaction, which did not control for other drivers or demographic variables, the coefficient estimate was statistically significant. However, after controlling for other drivers and demographic variables in our full multivariate model, it was no longer statistically significant. Of the 19 questions we analyzed, the question about pay satisfaction had the lowest statistical significance and the weakest association with employee engagement. For more information about our bivariate and multivariate models, see appendixes II and III.

<sup>9</sup>Herzberg, Frederick. "One More Time: How Do You Motivate Employees." *Harvard Business Review* 81, no. 1 (2003): 53–62.

<sup>10</sup>Research has shown that employee engagement is characterized by high-arousal positive states such as excitement, energy, and enthusiasm while job satisfaction is a low-arousal positive experience indicated by happiness, contentment, and pleasure. Bakker, Arnold B. "A job demands–resources approach to public service motivation." *Public Administration Review* 75, no. 5 (2015): 723–732.

<sup>11</sup>The other three items are "I recommend my organization as a good place to work," "Considering everything, how satisfied are you with your job?" and "Considering everything, how satisfied are you with your organization?"

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## Providing for Merit Systems Protection Board Appeals and Expanding Collective Bargaining Rights

TSA has also taken steps to expand certain employee labor rights. In September 2021, TSA entered into a memorandum of agreement with the Merit Systems Protection Board that expanded TSOs' options to appeal covered adverse actions, such as discipline or firing.<sup>12</sup> Following this change, TSOs can appeal actions taken against them by TSA to the Merit Systems Protection Board—an independent federal agency that hears and decides appeals brought by federal employees. TSOs have since pursued 99 cases with the Merit Systems Protection Board, according to information TSA provided as of September 2023.<sup>13</sup>

TSA also expanded TSOs' collective bargaining rights. In May 2023, TSA and its union representatives, the American Federation of Government Employees, entered into an agreement governing the procedures for negotiating a collective bargaining agreement, according to TSA human capital officials. The two parties have since initiated collective bargaining.

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<sup>12</sup>The statutory jurisdiction of the Merit Systems Protection Board was not affected by the Memorandum of Understanding. The Memorandum of Understanding established a contractual relationship between the Merit Systems Protection Board and TSA which includes, among other things, TSA's obligation of funds to reimburse the Merit Systems Protection Board for costs incurred while adjudicating TSO appeals. The Merit Systems Protection Board is an independent agency created by the Service Reform Act of 1978. Pub. L. No. 95-454, § 202, 92 Stat. 1111, 1121 (codified at 5 U.S.C. § 1201 et. seq.). Its mission is to protect merit system principles and promote an effective federal workforce free of prohibited personnel practices. Merit Systems Protection Board carries out its statutory responsibilities and authorities primarily by adjudicating individual employee appeals and by conducting merit systems studies.

<sup>13</sup>This includes appeals filed by TSOs, Lead TSOs, and Supervisory TSOs.

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**Appendix V: Additional Transportation  
Security Administration Actions to Improve  
Employee Engagement**

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Prior to this change, TSA employees had limited collective bargaining rights.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>14</sup>Through the Aviation and Transportation Security Act, the TSA Administrator has the authority to set the terms and conditions of employment for the screening workforce notwithstanding any other provision of law. Pub. L. No. 107-71, § 111(d), 115 Stat. 597, 620 (2001) (codified at 49 U.S.C. § 44935 note (Screener Personnel)). This provision therefore exempts TSA from Title 5, including collective bargaining rights provided for under Chapter 71: Labor-Management and Employee Relations. The TSA Administrator issued a Determination on Transportation Security Officers and Collective Bargaining on December 30, 2022, which stated, "...collective bargaining is permitted at the national level to the same extent as permitted under Chapter 71 of Title 5 of the United States Code and as set forth in the Determination. For example, issues that are conditions of employment under Chapter 71 for Title 5 agencies are also conditions of employment under this Determination." Transportation Security Administration, *Determination on Transportation Security Officers and Collective Bargaining* (Washington, DC.: Dec. 30, 2022). Through the Determination, the Administrator delegated many terms and conditions of employment originally under the Administrator's authority to collective bargaining, thereby expanding collective bargaining rights for TSOs.

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# Appendix VI: Comments from the Department of Homeland Security

**Appendix VI: Comments from the Department  
of Homeland Security**

U.S. Department of Homeland Security  
Washington, DC 20528



February 7, 2024

Tina Won Sherman  
Director, Homeland Security & Justice  
U.S. Government Accountability Office  
441 G Street, NW  
Washington, DC 20548-0001

Re: Management Response to Draft Report GAO-24-106052, "AVIATION  
SECURITY TRANSPORTATION: Security Administration Could Further  
Improve Officer Engagement"

Dear Ms. Won Sherman:

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on this draft report. The U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS or the Department) appreciates the U.S. Government Accountability Office's (GAO) work in planning and conducting its review and issuing this report.

DHS leadership is pleased to note GAO's positive recognition that the Transportation Security Administration (TSA) has taken action to address all five key drivers found by GAO to affect the engagement of TSA's Transportation Security Officers (TSO), who comprise the majority of TSA employees. GAO also noted that TSA's employee engagement scores have trended upward over the last 6 years on the Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey (FEVS) results, and that the 2023 FEVS results showed that TSA's score increased four percentage points (the DHS overall increase was three percentage points, and the government-wide average increase was one percentage point).

However, GAO's draft report could do more to acknowledge recent improvements to TSO employee engagement, as demonstrated in the 2023 FEVS results. By limiting much of the substantive discussion of these improvements to Appendix V of the report rather than including this information as part of the main draft report narrative, GAO does not fully contextualize how these improvements substantively affect the current state for many of the topics discussed throughout the report.

For example, Appendix V of the draft report acknowledges that the Office of Personnel Management's FEVS indicated that the percent of TSA employees satisfied with their

**Appendix VI: Comments from the Department  
of Homeland Security**

pay increased from 21 percent in 2022 to 44 percent in 2023, and that TSA’s score on the FEVS Global Satisfaction Index—measuring employee satisfaction as it relates to their work, pay, and organization—increased 15 percentage points (39 percent to 54 percent) from 2022 to 2023. Similarly, Appendix V notes that TSA’s Employee Engagement Index (EEI) increased four percentage points from 2022 to 2023, but does not give context that this was driven by an eight percentage increase to the Leaders Lead sub-index—which uses five survey questions that reflect the employees’ perceptions of the integrity of leadership, as well as leadership behaviors such as communication and workforce motivation. For comparison, the government-wide EEI average increased one percentage point. These significant improvements create a new baseline for improving TSO engagement at TSA. It is also important to substantively highlight that TSA experiencing its lowest attrition levels in almost a decade (decreasing by over 35 percent from 2022) is further evidence of the significant change experienced this past year.

DHS and TSA remain committed to improving TSO morale and engagement. “Commitment to people” remains a strategic priority for TSA, and TSA will further improve TSO career development, work-life balance, communications, and performance management, through such efforts as an upcoming “People and Culture Roadmap,” which will promote goals of focusing on people, fostering an inclusive culture, and ensuring sustainability to serve to the betterment of TSA’s workforce.

The draft report contained nine recommendations with which the Department concurs. Enclosed find our detailed response to each recommendation. DHS previously submitted technical comments addressing accuracy, contextual, and other issues under a separate cover for GAO’s consideration.

Again, thank you for the opportunity to review and comment on this draft report. Please feel free to contact me if you have any questions. We look forward to working with you again in the future.

Sincerely,

JIM H CRUMPACKER  Digitally signed by JIM H  
CRUMPACKER  
Date: 2024.02.07 12:28:19 -05'00'

JIM H. CRUMPACKER, CIA, CFE  
Director  
Departmental GAO-OIG Liaison Office

Enclosure



**Enclosure: Management Response to Recommendations  
Contained in GAO 24-106052**

GAO recommended that the TSA Administrator:

**Recommendation 1:** Identify and implement actions, as appropriate, to address the underlying root causes of TSO dissatisfaction the agency has identified with how TSA manages and recognizes performance.

**Response:** Concur. TSA’s Human Capital is building a method to solicit feedback on employee perception of the quality of their performance discussion into the TSA performance management program. This feedback will be provided to second-line managers to use in assisting with the performance evaluation of their subordinate supervisors and coaching them on improvements.

Additionally, TSA is working to ensure supervisors are trained appropriately in delivering effective performance feedback. Specifically, TSA’s Human Capital and Training and Development is updating the “Engaging in Effective Employee Relations” course that will be completed by supervisory personnel at TSA. The first six modules are specific to performance management, and the course defines performance management, identifies what role a supervisor plays in the process, and emphasizes the importance of providing timely feedback to the employee throughout the performance year along with open and constant communication between the employee and supervisor.

In terms of performance recognition, TSA will build on improvements showed by the 2023 FEVS results, such as a 12 percent increase in positive responses to the question “[i]n my work unit, differences in performance are recognized in a meaningful way.” This as a positive indicator that current recognition programs—such as “On-the-Spot” and special achievement awards, honorary awards, and the Model Officer Recognition (MOR) program—have made strides in improving engagement in this area. With changes to overall compensation taking place in July 2023, TSA will closely monitor employee feedback on these programs, particularly the 2024 FEVS results, to determine what additional steps are necessary in this area, as appropriate, as the MOR program continues to mature. Estimated Completion Date (ECD): December 31, 2024.

**Recommendation 2:** Conduct an analysis to identify the underlying root causes of TSO dissatisfaction with their opportunities for career development.

**Response:** Concur. All TSA offices at airports that received a FEVS report for 2023 are currently conducting “Local Action Planning” efforts, which includes holding focus groups and developing action teams that will identify specific actions to improve employee engagement and morale at their location, which each TSA office will submit to

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**Appendix VI: Comments from the Department  
of Homeland Security**

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TSA Human Capital. Once received, TSA Human Capital will conduct an analysis on the submitted local action plans and causes around TSO dissatisfaction with opportunities for career development, to identify root causes on a national level. ECD: July 31, 2024.

**Recommendation 3:** Identify and implement actions, as appropriate, to address the root causes of TSO dissatisfaction with their opportunities for career development.

**Response:** Concur. Following the completion of an analysis to identify the underlying root causes of TSO dissatisfaction with their opportunities for career development, TSA Human Capital will lead efforts to identify and implement actions to address the root causes identified, as appropriate.

However, it is also important to note actions previously taken by TSA to improve TSO satisfaction and opportunities for career development. Specifically, TSA expanded the TSO career ladder in July 2023 from a 2-step non-competitive career progression model to a 3-step career progression model that accounts for the increased complexity of the TSO position. As this action has already received positive feedback in this area with the 2024 FEVS, TSA anticipates satisfaction to increase further as TSOs continue to move through the new career progression model.

TSA also deployed a Career Management Portal in the summer of 2020, which provides visibility and accessibility to potential career paths, and highlights opportunities for TSA personnel to improve performance in their current role or develop the knowledge, skills, and abilities necessary for other positions. The portal spotlights career advancement opportunities that are compatible with where TSA personnel are currently in their career and where they may want to be in the future, enabling them to create their own unique career path. In addition, TSA Human Capital offers workshops to assist employees with effective resume writing and interviewing techniques, developing an individual development plan, as well as providing upskilling/reskilling opportunities for the workforce. These resources are provided to help employees at all levels advance their careers in the TSA. Further, TSA continues to provide a Mentoring Program to engage, educate, and empower the workforce by connecting personnel across the agency to share experiences and other resources employees may use to help their career growth. ECD: December 31, 2024.

**Recommendation 4:** Conduct an analysis to identify the underlying root causes of TSO dissatisfaction with TSA support for their work-life balance.

**Response:** Concur. Following completion of “Local Action Planning” efforts underway across TSA at all airports that received a FEVS report for 2023, TSA Human Capital will further analyze the submitted action plans to identify root causes of TSO dissatisfaction with TSA support for their work-life balance. ECD: July 31, 2024.

**Recommendation 5:** Identify and implement actions, as appropriate, to address the root causes of TSO dissatisfaction with TSA support for their work-life balance.

**Response:** Concur. Following completion of the analysis to identify the underlying root causes of TSO dissatisfaction with TSA support for their work-life balance, TSA Human Capital will lead efforts to identify and implement actions to address the root causes identified, as appropriate.

However, it is also important to note actions previously taken by TSA to improve satisfaction with work-life balance, given that TSOs face particular challenges when it comes to things like work schedules or the ability to take leave given operational requirements that are dictated by airline schedules. Specifically, in December 2022, the TSA Administrator expanded the collective bargaining rights labor framework for non-supervisory TSOs, so that it closely mirrors 5 U.S.C. Chapter 71. These expanded labor rights allow the American Federation of Government Employees, the exclusive TSA representative, greater input regarding matters affecting bargaining unit employees. ECD: December 31, 2024.

**Recommendation 6:** Track and monitor airport leadership progress implementing the three actions identified in each airport Local Action Plan to ensure the plans are implemented.

**Response:** Concur. Currently, TSA's "Employee Engagement Action Plan," dated September 21, 2023, requires that each location that received a FEVS report in 2023 submit a Local Action Plan addressing local issues involving employee morale and engagement to TSA Human Capital no later than March 1, 2024. TSA Human Capital developed a process to track and monitor these submissions, and will conduct data analysis of the action plans after all plans are submitted. TSA is on a 2-year action-planning cycle which requires all airports, offices, and field offices to develop and submit an action plan every 2 years, and conducts a mid-cycle update after each first year of the cycle. The mid-cycle update will show all implemented efforts along with any updates, changes, or additional actions added to the plan and submitted to TSA Human Capital. ECD: July 31, 2024.

**Recommendation 7:** Track and monitor whether employees and supervisors discuss the results from Leadership for Engagement Surveys and use those results to inform the development and implementation of individual action plans.

**Response:** Concur. TSA's Human Capital will develop a process to track and monitor whether supervisors who receive Leadership for Engagement Individual Feedback Reports discuss the results with their manager and use those results to inform the development and implementation of individual action plans. This will be completed by local Leadership for Engagement coordinators who will provide an affirmative report

documenting the occurrence of discussions or acceptable reasons as to why a discussion did not occur (e.g. employee retirement, etc.). ECD: August 30, 2024.

**Recommendation 8:** Conduct an analysis to identify the underlying root causes of TSO dissatisfaction with communication from management.

**Response:** Concur. Following completion of the “Local Action Planning” efforts currently underway across TSA at all airports that received a FEVS report for 2023, TSA Human Capital will analyze the submitted action plans and identify root causes around dissatisfaction with communication from management. ECD: July 31, 2024.

**Recommendation 9:** Identify and implement actions, as appropriate, to address the root causes of TSO dissatisfaction with communication from management.

**Response:** Concur. Following completion of the analysis identify the underlying root causes of TSO dissatisfaction with communication from management, TSA Human Capital will lead efforts to identify and implement actions to address the root causes identified, as appropriate.

However, it is also important to note actions previously taken by TSA to improve satisfaction with communication from management, as evidenced by the 2 percent improvement in the supervisor’s sub-index of the 2023 FEVS results for TSA. These efforts include updating standardized TSA training on an ongoing basis, as appropriate, such as the “Fundamentals of Leadership” course, which is required for all first time supervisors and reinforces communications skills by teaching participants how to identify the keys to effective leadership communication, to practice active listening, and to ask powerful questions for achieving greater performance outcomes. TSA’s Leadership Institute also provides training for employees at the J and K bands that emphasizes advanced communication themes, such as active listening and handling difficult conversations

TSA also currently uses “Leadership for Engagement” surveys nationally on a bi-annual basis to allow all employees to provide periodic and direct feedback to their leadership on the effectiveness of leadership behaviors, including communication, and provide opportunities for improvement. ECD: December 31, 2024.

# Accessible Text for Appendix VI: Comments from the Department of Homeland Security

February 7, 2024

Tina Won Sherman  
Director, Homeland Security & Justice  
U.S. Government Accountability Office  
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Washington, DC 20548-0001

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DHS and TSA remain committed to improving TSO morale and engagement. “Commitment to people” remains a strategic priority for TSA, and TSA will further improve TSO career development, work-life balance, communications, and performance management, through such efforts as an upcoming “People and Culture Roadmap,” which will promote goals of focusing on people, fostering an inclusive culture, and ensuring sustainability to serve to the betterment of TSA’s workforce.

The draft report contained nine recommendations with which the Department concurs. Enclosed find our detailed response to each recommendation. DHS previously submitted technical comments addressing accuracy, contextual, and other issues under a separate cover for GAO’s consideration.

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Sincerely,

JIM H CRUMPACKER

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JIM H. CRUMPACKER, CIA, CFE  
Director  
Departmental GAO-OIG Liaison Office

Enclosure

**Enclosure: Management Response to Recommendations Contained in GAO  
24-106052**

GAO recommended that the TSA Administrator:

**Recommendation 1:** Identify and implement actions, as appropriate, to address the underlying root causes of TSO dissatisfaction the agency has identified with how TSA manages and recognizes performance.

**Response:** Concur. TSA's Human Capital is building a method to solicit feedback on employee perception of the quality of their performance discussion into the TSA performance management program. This feedback will be provided to second-line managers to use in assisting with the performance evaluation of their subordinate supervisors and coaching them on improvements.

Additionally, TSA is working to ensure supervisors are trained appropriately in delivering effective performance feedback. Specifically, TSA's Human Capital and Training and Development is updating the "Engaging in Effective Employee Relations" course that will be completed by supervisory personnel at TSA. The first six modules are specific to performance management, and the course defines performance management, identifies what role a supervisor plays in the process, and emphasizes the importance of providing timely feedback to the employee throughout the performance year along with open and constant communication between the employee and supervisor.

In terms of performance recognition, TSA will build on improvements showed by the 2023 FEVS results, such as a 12 percent increase in positive responses to the question "[i]n my work unit, differences in performance are recognized in a meaningful way." This as a positive indicator that current recognition programs—such as "On-the-Spot" and special achievement awards, honorary awards, and the Model Officer Recognition (MOR) program—have made strides in improving engagement in this area. With changes to overall compensation taking place in July 2023, TSA will closely monitor employee feedback on these programs, particularly the 2024 FEVS results, to determine what additional steps are necessary in this area, as appropriate, as the MOR program continues to mature. Estimated Completion Date (ECD): December 31, 2024.

**Recommendation 2:** Conduct an analysis to identify the underlying root causes of TSO dissatisfaction with their opportunities for career development.

**Response:** Concur. All TSA offices at airports that received a FEVS report for 2023 are currently conducting “Local Action Planning” efforts, which includes holding focus groups and developing action teams that will identify specific actions to improve employee engagement and morale at their location, which each TSA office will submit to TSA Human Capital. Once received, TSA Human Capital will conduct an analysis on the submitted local action plans and causes around TSO dissatisfaction with opportunities for career development, to identify root causes on a national level. ECD: July 31, 2024.

**Recommendation 3:** Identify and implement actions, as appropriate, to address the root causes of TSO dissatisfaction with their opportunities for career development.

**Response:** Concur. Following the completion of an analysis to identify the underlying root causes of TSO dissatisfaction with their opportunities for career development, TSA Human Capital will lead efforts to identify and implement actions to address the root causes identified, as appropriate.

However, it is also important to note actions previously taken by TSA to improve TSO satisfaction and opportunities for career development. Specifically, TSA expanded the TSO career ladder in July 2023 from a 2-step non-competitive career progression model to a 3-step career progression model that accounts for the increased complexity of the TSO position. As this action has already received positive feedback in this area with the 2024 FEVS, TSA anticipates satisfaction to increase further as TSOs continue to move through the new career progression model.

TSA also deployed a Career Management Portal in the summer of 2020, which provides visibility and accessibility to potential career paths, and highlights opportunities for TSA personnel to improve performance in their current role or develop the knowledge, skills, and abilities necessary for other positions. The portal spotlights career advancement opportunities that are compatible with where TSA personnel are currently in their career and where they may want to be in the future, enabling them to create their own unique career path. In addition, TSA Human Capital offers workshops to assist employees with effective resume writing and interviewing techniques, developing an individual development plan, as well as providing upskilling/reskilling opportunities for the workforce. These resources are provided to help employees at all levels advance their careers in the TSA. Further, TSA continues to provide a Mentoring Program to engage, educate, and empower the workforce by connecting personnel across the agency to share experiences and



other resources employees may use to help their career growth. ECD: December 31, 2024.

**Recommendation 4:** Conduct an analysis to identify the underlying root causes of TSO dissatisfaction with TSA support for their work-life balance.

**Response:** Concur. Following completion of “Local Action Planning” efforts underway across TSA at all airports that received a FEVS report for 2023, TSA Human Capital will further analyze the submitted action plans to identify root causes of TSO dissatisfaction with TSA support for their work-life balance. ECD: July 31, 2024.

**Recommendation 5:** Identify and implement actions, as appropriate, to address the root causes of TSO dissatisfaction with TSA support for their work-life balance.

**Response:** Concur. Following completion of the analysis to identify the underlying root causes of TSO dissatisfaction with TSA support for their work-life balance, TSA Human Capital will lead efforts to identify and implement actions to address the root causes identified, as appropriate.

However, it is also important to note actions previously taken by TSA to improve satisfaction with work-life balance, given that TSOs face particular challenges when it comes to things like work schedules or the ability to take leave given operational requirements that are dictated by airline schedules. Specifically, in December 2022, the TSA Administrator expanded the collective bargaining rights labor framework for non-supervisory TSOs, so that it closely mirrors 5 U.S.C. Chapter 71. These expanded labor rights allow the American Federation of Government Employees, the exclusive TSA representative, greater input regarding matters affecting bargaining unit employees.

ECD: December 31, 2024.

**Recommendation 6:** Track and monitor airport leadership progress implementing the three actions identified in each airport Local Action Plan to ensure the plans are implemented.

**Response:** Concur. Currently, TSA’s “Employee Engagement Action Plan,” dated September 21, 2023, requires that each location that received a FEVS report in 2023 submit a Local Action Plan addressing local issues involving employee morale and engagement to TSA Human Capital no later than March 1, 2024. TSA Human Capital developed a process to track and monitor these submissions, and will conduct data analysis of the action plans after all plans are submitted. TSA is on a 2-year action-planning cycle which requires all airports, offices, and field offices to develop and submit an action plan every 2 years, and conducts a mid-cycle update

after each first year of the cycle. The mid-cycle update will show all implemented efforts along with any updates, changes, or additional actions added to the plan and submitted to TSA Human Capital.

ECD: July 31, 2024.

**Recommendation 7:** Track and monitor whether employees and supervisors discuss the results from Leadership for Engagement Surveys and use those results to inform the development and implementation of individual action plans.

**Response:** Concur. TSA's Human Capital will develop a process to track and monitor whether supervisors who receive Leadership for Engagement Individual Feedback Reports discuss the results with their manager and use those results to inform the development and implementation of individual action plans. This will be completed by local Leadership for Engagement coordinators who will provide an affirmative report documenting the occurrence of discussions or acceptable reasons as to why a discussion did not occur (e.g. employee retirement, etc.). ECD: August 30, 2024.

**Recommendation 8:** Conduct an analysis to identify the underlying root causes of TSO dissatisfaction with communication from management.

**Response:** Concur. Following completion of the "Local Action Planning" efforts currently underway across TSA at all airports that received a FEVS report for 2023, TSA Human Capital will analyze the submitted action plans and identify root causes around dissatisfaction with communication from management. ECD: July 31, 2024.

**Recommendation 9:** Identify and implement actions, as appropriate, to address the root causes of TSO dissatisfaction with communication from management.

**Response:** Concur. Following completion of the analysis identify the underlying root causes of TSO dissatisfaction with communication from management, TSA Human Capital will lead efforts to identify and implement actions to address the root causes identified, as appropriate.

However, it is also important to note actions previously taken by TSA to improve satisfaction with communication from management, as evidenced by the 2 percent improvement in the supervisor's sub-index of the 2023 FEVS results for TSA. These efforts include updating standardized TSA training on an ongoing basis, as appropriate, such as the "Fundamentals of Leadership" course, which is required for all first time supervisors and reinforces communications skills by teaching participants how to identify the keys to effective leadership communication, to practice active listening, and to ask powerful questions for achieving greater performance outcomes. TSA's Leadership Institute also provides training for

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employees at the J and K bands that emphasizes advanced communication themes, such as active listening and handling difficult conversations

TSA also currently uses “Leadership for Engagement” surveys nationally on a bi-annual basis to allow all employees to provide periodic and direct feedback to their leadership on the effectiveness of leadership behaviors, including communication, and provide opportunities for improvement. ECD: December 31, 2024.

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## Appendix VII: GAO Contact and Staff Acknowledgments

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### GAO Contact

Tina Won Sherman, (202) 512-8461 or [shermant@gao.gov](mailto:shermant@gao.gov)

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### Staff Acknowledgments

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