TRANSPORTATION SECURITY ADMINISTRATION

Progress and Challenges Faced in Strengthening Three Key Security Programs

Why GAO Did This Study

DHS and TSA have made some notable achievements in securing the nation's transportation systems since the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, but in recent years, GAO reported that DHS has experienced challenges in managing its efforts including fielding programs prior to determining their effectiveness or completing cost-benefit analyses. This testimony focuses on, among other things, DHS and TSA's progress and challenges in implementing three key security programs: SPOT, AIT, and TWIC. This testimony is based on reports and testimonies issued from November 2009 through March 2012, and includes selected updates conducted from February through March 2012. To conduct these updates, GAO obtained information on the current status of the programs and progress made related to the implementation of recommendations contained in prior GAO reports.

What GAO Recommends

GAO is not making any new recommendations. In prior work, GAO made recommendations to address challenges related to assessing SPOT effectiveness as well as AIT utilization. GAO also recommended that DHS assess TWIC effectiveness and use this assessment to evaluate the costs, benefits, and risks of TWIC. DHS and TSA concurred and have actions underway to address the recommendations.

What GAO Found

The Transportation Security Administration (TSA) relies on layers of security encompassing personnel, processes, and technology to deter, detect, and disrupt persons posing a potential risk to aviation security. The Screening of Passengers by Observation Techniques (SPOT) program consists of about 3,000 behavior detection officers (BDO) who examine passengers to identify those who might pose a security risk at over 160 TSA-regulated airports. Advanced Imaging Technology (AIT)—full body scanners—are intended to help TSA staff detect explosives and other threats on passengers. Also, TSA and the U.S. Coast Guard manage the Transportation Worker Identification Credential (TWIC) program, which employs a federally-sponsored credential in an effort to enhance access controls at Maritime Transportation Security Act regulated facilities and vessels. The Department of Homeland Security (DHS) and TSA have made progress and faced challenges in implementing these programs.

SPOT. Additional DHS and TSA actions are needed to validate SPOT and to establish performance measures. GAO reported in May 2010 that TSA deployed SPOT nationwide before determining whether it had a scientifically valid basis. GAO recommended that DHS convene an independent panel of experts to review DHS's efforts to validate SPOT and determine whether the methodology used was sufficiently comprehensive. DHS agreed and completed this study in April 2011. The study found that SPOT was more effective than random screening to varying degrees; however, as noted in the study, the assessment was an initial validation step and was not designed to fully validate whether BDOs can reliably identify individuals who pose a security risk. According to DHS, additional work will be needed to validate SPOT. Also, GAO reported that TSA has implemented certain performance measures to assess the program, but has not fielded outcome-oriented performance measures—which track progress by documenting the beneficial results of programs—to help assess SPOT's contribution to improving aviation security. In May 2010, GAO recommended and TSA agreed that to better measure SPOT's effectiveness and evaluate the performance of BDOs, TSA should establish a plan to develop outcome-oriented performance measures.

AIT. DHS accelerated the deployment of AIT to identify threat materials and to provide enhanced security benefits compared to metal detectors. In January 2012, GAO reported instances where AIT units were not being used, raising questions about the cost-effectiveness of this acquisition. For example, data GAO collected from March 2010 through February 2011 on all deployed AIT units showed that some deployed units were not used regularly, decreasing their potential security benefit. GAO recommended and TSA agreed to study AIT utilization and address the extent to which currently deployed units are used.

TWIC. As of March 2012, the TWIC program has enrolled over 2.1 million maritime workers and DHS has established TWIC-related processes and controls. In May 2011, GAO recommended that DHS conduct an assessment that includes addressing internal control weaknesses and evaluate whether use of TWIC would further enhance the security posture. GAO also recommended that this assessment be used to evaluate the costs, benefits, and security risks of the TWIC program prior to requiring its use. DHS agreed and, as of March 2012, reports that it is further evaluating the TWIC program.