

GAO@100 Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-21-104029](#), a report to congressional requesters

Why GAO Did This Study

In recent years, new laws gave the Department of Transportation's FTA additional requirements and authorities to oversee transit safety. In turn, FTA now requires, among other things, transit agencies to develop new safety plans that incorporate SMS to manage and mitigate safety risk. FTA also incorporated SMS in its transit agency oversight to better identify and assess safety risks, and determine appropriate mitigation efforts, including mandatory safety standards.

GAO was asked to examine how FTA is implementing its new responsibilities and authorities. This report examines (1) selected transit agencies' experiences in incorporating SMS in their new safety plans; (2) steps FTA is taking to identify, assess, and mitigate safety risks; and (3) FTA's status on mandating safety standards and stakeholders' views on the benefits and challenges of such standards. GAO reviewed FTA documents on safety oversight policies and practices and interviewed officials from 12 transit agencies and their 9 respective state oversight agencies. GAO selected transit agencies to reflect a variety of modes, sizes, age, and geographic diversity.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that FTA identify and document lessons learned from the camera pilot, including a plan to implement needed changes. DOT concurred with this recommendation and provided technical changes to the draft report, which we incorporated as appropriate.

View [GAO-21-104029](#). For more information, contact Andrew Von Ah at (202) 512-2834 or vonaha@gao.gov.

September 2021

PUBLIC TRANSPORTATION

Identifying Lessons Learned Could Help Improve FTA's Process to Manage Safety Risks

What GAO Found

Of the twelve selected transit agencies GAO spoke with, most faced challenges incorporating the Federal Transit Administration's (FTA) requirements to develop and document its Safety Management Systems (SMS) in their new agency safety plans. SMS is a performance-based, data-driven framework to manage safety risks throughout an organization. Some rail transit agencies noted difficulties transitioning from the former 21-element safety plan to SMS and its four required components. However, most transit agencies said they benefited from FTA's assistance. FTA's assistance included guidance documents, webinars, and training. Upon request, FTA also reviewed transit agencies' draft safety plans, providing lessons learned from those reviews.

FTA established a Safety Risk Management (SRM) process to identify, assess, and mitigate safety risks across the nation's transit agencies. During the initial implementation, FTA selected four safety concerns to review (see fig. below). According to FTA, the use of cameras on rail transit was a pilot project, and FTA has completed four of the five steps in its process for the camera safety pilot. Though FTA continues to evaluate that pilot and work on the other three safety concerns, it has not completed actions to prepare for future rounds of the SRM process. In particular, FTA has not identified and documented lessons learned from the pilot. Documenting and incorporating such lessons could enhance the effectiveness and timeliness of FTA's SRM process and thus FTA's ability to address transit-wide safety risks.

GAO's Assessment of the Status of the Safety Risk Management (SRM) Process for Four Safety Issues under Review by the Federal Transit Administration (FTA)

Federal Transit Administration (FTA) safety concerns	Safety Risk Management steps					
	Identify safety concern	Assess safety risk	Develop mitigation measures	Implement mitigation measures	Monitor safety performance	
Use of cameras	●	●	●	●	◐	● Completed
End-of-railcar signage	●	◐	◐	○	○	◐ Partially completed
Signal system safety	●	◐	◐	○	○	○ Not completed
Roadway worker protections	●	●	◐	○	○	○ Not completed

Source: GAO analysis of FTA documentation and interviews of FTA officials, as of June 2021. | GAO-21-104029

FTA continues to gather information while it considers whether to mandate certain transit safety standards. FTA has issued safety bulletins for rail cameras and end-of-railcar signage. These bulletins suggest but do not require certain actions related to the installation of cameras and signage in rail transit cars. FTA, however, has not yet initiated a rulemaking for any mandatory federal safety standards. While the diverse nature of the transit industry can make setting federal safety standards challenging, transit agencies GAO spoke with were generally open to mandatory safety standards for some safety issues. For example, many of the selected transit agencies expressed support for requiring medical examinations of employees, as well as other so-called human-factor safety risks.