

# GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-16-582](#), a report to congressional requesters

## Why GAO Did This Study

Following the September 11, 2001, hijacking of four U.S. airliners, individuals with terrorist ties have attempted attacks against the nation's civil aviation system. To help address such threats, FAMS, an office within TSA, is tasked with promoting confidence in the nation's civil aviation system through the deployment of air marshals to protect U.S. air carriers, airports, passengers, and crews. GAO was asked to review FAMS operations. This report examines the extent to which (1) FAMS deploys air marshals based on risk and (2) FAMS's performance measure reflects attributes of successful performance measures. GAO reviewed FAMS's strategy and performance measure documents, analyzed FAMS's fiscal years 2010 through 2014 flight coverage and performance measure data, and interviewed FAMS and TSA officials.

## What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that FAMS (1) further incorporate risk into FAMS's method for dividing resources between international and domestic flights, (2) conduct a risk assessment to support certain domestic deployment decisions, (3) document the rationale for FAMS's selection of international deployment destinations, (4) adopt a consistent name and definition for the TSA coverage score, and (5) report performance results for all categories that comprise the score. DHS concurred with all of the recommendations.

View [GAO-16-582](#). For more information, contact Jennifer Grover at (202) 512-7141 or [groverj@gao.gov](mailto:groverj@gao.gov).

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## FEDERAL AIR MARSHAL SERVICE

### Actions Needed to Better Incorporate Risk in Deployment Strategy

## What GAO Found

The U.S. Federal Air Marshal Service (FAMS) deploys air marshals in part based on assessed risk, but could better incorporate risk in its deployment strategy. FAMS may deploy air marshals on flights with known risk—meaning certain higher risk flights where the Transportation Security Administration (TSA) or FAMS knows of an increase in the threat or consequence of a terrorist attack—as well as on other international and domestic flights of U.S. air carriers. However, GAO identified three ways FAMS could better incorporate risk into its deployment decisions, in accordance with Department of Homeland Security (DHS) and TSA risk management policy and guidance.

- FAMS considers its travel budget and number of personnel, but not risk when initially dividing its annual resources between domestic and international flights. With this approach, FAMS attempts to maximize the total number of flights it can cover, but because this model does not account for risk, FAMS cannot ensure it is devoting its resources to the highest risk flights overall.
- FAMS officials report that when FAMS revised its domestic deployment strategy in 2014, their choice of geographic focus areas and resource allocation levels were based on subject matter experts' professional judgment, not a risk assessment. FAMS officials stated this approach was appropriate because they were updating the strategy, not conducting a study. While providing perceptions of risk, the experts' input was not systematically collected and assigned risk values. Doing so would better position FAMS to ensure its resources are targeted using a risk-based approach.
- FAMS does not document rationales for its international deployment decisions because it has not identified a need to do so. Without documentation of the basis for these decisions, neither FAMS nor an external party can effectively oversee these decisions.

The performance measure FAMS has used to assess the extent to which it has met its flight coverage and resource use targets—the TSA coverage score—reflects some but not all attributes of successful performance measures. The TSA coverage score is a composite score for 11 performance categories, including air marshal coverage of certain domestic and international flights. The measure lacks clarity because the measure's name and definition are not consistent with the methodology used to calculate it. For example, the measure aggregates flight coverage and resource allocation information, which reduces the clarity of the score and makes it difficult to interpret. It also lacks objectivity because, as a composite measure, it does not show performance below or above desired levels in the 11 categories—information that would aid decision making. FAMS officials stated that they did not report scores for all categories to TSA or FAMS leadership because they were not asked to do so. Without clear and objective performance information, DHS, TSA, and FAMS leadership may be making decisions based on an inaccurate impression of FAMS's performance.

This is a public version of a classified report GAO issued in February 2016. Information that DHS deemed classified or sensitive has been omitted.