

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-20-125](#), a report to congressional requesters

Why GAO Did This Study

In the wake of 9/11, terrorists continue to target aircraft and airports, underscoring the ongoing threat to civil aviation and the need for effective security measures. FAMS deploys air marshals on selected flights to address such threats and is a key component of TSA's approach to aviation security. However, longstanding challenges faced by FAMS's workforce could impact its ability to carry out its mission.

GAO was asked to review FAMS workforce issues. This report addresses (1) the extent to which FAMS has taken steps to address air marshals' health concerns, (2) the extent to which FAMS has taken steps to address air marshals' concerns about their work schedules, and (3) the number of discrimination complaints FAMS employees have reported and the extent to which FAMS has taken steps to prevent discrimination.

GAO analyzed TSA and FAMS policies; documentation of efforts to address air marshals' quality of life issues; and FAMS data on missions, schedules, and discrimination complaints. GAO also interviewed TSA and FAMS officials, including FAMS management and air marshals in a non-generalizable sample of six FAMS field offices selected to capture a breadth of perspectives.

What GAO Recommends

GAO is making six recommendations to FAMS, including that it implement a plan to assess the health of the FAMS workforce, monitor the extent that air marshals' shifts are consistent with guidelines, and strengthen efforts to prevent discrimination. DHS concurred with all six recommendations.

View [GAO-20-125](#). For more information, contact William Russell at (202) 512-8777 or russellw@gao.gov.

February 2020

AVIATION SECURITY

Federal Air Marshal Service Has Taken Steps to Address Workforce Issues, but Additional Actions Needed

What GAO Found

Air marshals continue to express concerns about their health, but the Federal Air Marshal Service (FAMS) has not comprehensively assessed the health of its workforce. Air marshals in all six field offices we visited noted health issues, such as sleep deprivation, as a key quality of life concern. FAMS has taken steps to assess air marshals' individual health, such as requiring medical exams, but has not comprehensively assessed the overall health of its workforce and has not developed a plan to do so. FAMS officials stated that it would be difficult to analyze air marshals' medical records because they are not stored electronically, though they are researching options to do so. FAMS could develop and implement a plan to analyze the employee health data it already collects to identify workforce trends, and use this information to better promote employee welfare consistent with Transportation Security Administration (TSA) leadership principles.



Source: GAO. | GAO-20-125

FAMS has taken some steps to address air marshals' concerns about their work schedules. In March 2018, FAMS revised its deployment strategy to expand coverage of certain high risk missions that it typically learns of 72 hours in advance. Following this, changes to air marshals' schedules to accommodate these missions more than doubled. In response, FAMS altered how it staffs these missions and reports that these modifications have reduced schedule changes. FAMS also maintains shift length and rest period guidelines intended to balance mission needs with air marshals' quality of life. However, FAMS does not monitor the extent to which air marshals' actual work hours are consistent with guidelines because it has not identified a need to do so. As a result, it cannot determine how frequently air marshals work beyond guidelines and is not well-positioned to manage risks associated with long work hours.

From fiscal years 2016 through 2018, FAMS employees filed 230 discrimination complaints with TSA's Civil Rights Division, though employees may have reported additional discrimination complaints through other means. In 2012, FAMS adopted an action plan to address discrimination and has taken some steps called for in the plan, such as sustaining a FAMS Ombudsman position. However, due to a loss of management focus on the plan, FAMS has not fully implemented other planned efforts, such as holding diversity focus groups. Taking steps to reaffirm its efforts to prevent discrimination would demonstrate leadership commitment to reducing concerns of discrimination within FAMS.