

# ISSUE BRIEF

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## Federal Flight Deck Officer Program: First Line of Deterrence, Last Line of Defense

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In his fiscal year (FY) 2013 budget proposal for the Department of Homeland Security, President Obama called for a 50 percent cut in funding for the Federal Flight Deck Officer (FFDO) program. Often seen as the last line of defense against the threat of terrorist hijackings and other air piracy, this low-cost program offers an important additional layer of deterrence against terrorism. The President's decision to decrease the program's funding drastically, therefore, makes little sense. As the budget process continues, Congress should be careful to fully examine the benefits of the FFDO program and seek to continue the program in full funding.

**The Federal Flight Deck Officer Program.** On November 25, 2002, the Homeland Security Act of 2002 was signed into law. Title

XIV of the law, the Arming Pilots Against Terrorism Act, directed the TSA to deputize pilots as federal law enforcement officers. On April 19, 2003, the first group of Federal Flight Deck Officers was deputized.

Today, U.S. citizen flight crew members who work on passenger planes, private charters, and cargo air carriers are all eligible to participate in the FFDO program. To become an FFDO, participants must undergo physical and psychological testing and complete training on the handling of firearms, use of force, and defensive tactics. While FFDOs are considered federal law enforcement officers, they are not granted the power to make arrests and are not permitted to exercise law enforcement responsibilities outside an aircraft flight deck.

The Transportation Security Administration (TSA) and the Federal Air Marshal Service cover the cost of training and equipment; however, program participants are required to cover all other travel expenses as well as give up one week of paid work for training. According to one estimate by the executive vice president of the Federal Flight Deck Officers Association, the average pilot who volunteers for their program may spend somewhere

in the range of \$10,000 of his own money attending training and other activities, such as biannual firearms requalification.

For the American taxpayer, however, the FFDO program costs very little—only approximately \$15 per officer per flight. The Federal Air Marshal program, although also an important added layer of security, in comparison costs an estimated \$3,300 per air marshal per flight. In this regard, some have ventured to call the FFDO program one of the United States' most cost-effective counterterrorism programs.

**Misguided Budget Cuts.** Despite the program's incredibly low cost, the President's FY 2013 budget request proposed that the funding for the FFDO be cut by \$12.6 million, or approximately 50 percent. In recent hearings, Homeland Security Secretary Janet Napolitano sought to justify this decision by indicating the cuts were made because the "program is not risk-based." At the same time, the Secretary also indicated that she thought the "armed cockpit door is probably [the last line of defense]" rather than the armed FFDO officers.<sup>1</sup>

This assessment, however, fails to recognize the strategic value of terrorists or other actors never knowing

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when a FFDO may be on board. At present, FFDOs are estimated to be able to cover five times as many flights as Federal Air Marshals, providing a strong added layer of defense and deterrence against the threat of terrorism and air piracy.

Since the FFDO program's inception in 2003, its budget has not changed, despite an estimated 100-fold increase in members. This year's proposed budget cut will only make matters worse for the FFDO program.

Rather than cutting key aviation security programs, Congress should, at a minimum:

- **Fully fund the Federal Flight Deck Office program.** At a low cost to the American taxpayer, the Federal Flight Deck Officer program offers the first line of deterrence and the last line of defense against aviation piracy and terrorism. Rather than agreeing to the President's budgetary request, Congress should, at a minimum, fully fund the FFDO program. Congress should also consider an increase in the funding level of this program to reflect the increased participation.
- **Strengthen the Secure Flight program.** Begun in 2009, the Secure Flight program checks a passenger's data against a federal database of the FBI Terrorist Screening Center, screening passenger data and flagging possible terrorists before they board commercial flights. As of November 2010, 100 percent of U.S.-bound foreign and domestic passengers were screened through Secure Flight. The Secure Flight program, however, could still be strengthened, particularly by ensuring that the FBI Terrorist Screening Center databases are up-to-date.
- **Reconsider privatization of airport security.** In February, Congress passed an amendment to the Federal Aviation Administration authorization act calling on the TSA to restore the Security Partnership Program (SPP), the nearly eight-year-old program allowing U.S. airports to opt out of federal screening and instead privatize their security forces. This program should be expanded to allow TSA to devolve screening responsibility to the airport level under the

supervision of a federal security director. Without the burden of running a massive screening force, the TSA could turn its attention to developing a 21st-century international passenger and cargo security system that does not waste resources by treating every person and package as an equal risk that requires scrutiny and screening.

#### **Effective Aviation Security.**

The Department of Homeland Security is right to support a greater shift toward a risk-based approach to aviation security. Rather than using this shift to justify cuts to low-cost, effective programs such as the FFDO, Congress and the Administration should take a hard look at the current aviation security enterprise to promote and expand those programs that will truly protect the flying public.

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1. Secretary Janet Napolitano, "An Examination of the President's 2013 Budget Request for the Department of Homeland Security," testimony before the Committee on Homeland Security, U.S. House of Representatives, February 15, 2012, at <http://homeland.house.gov/hearing/hearing-examination-presidents-fy-2013-budget-request-department-homeland-security> (March 19, 2012).