



Highlights of [GAO-04-795](#), a report to the Chairman, Subcommittee on National Security, Emerging Threats, and International Relations, Committee on Government Reform, House of Representatives

BORDER SECURITY

Additional Actions Needed to Eliminate Weaknesses in the Visa Revocation Process

Why GAO Did This Study

The *National Strategy for Homeland Security* calls for preventing foreign terrorists from entering our country and using all legal means to identify; halt; and where appropriate, prosecute or bring immigration or other civil charges against terrorists in the United States. GAO reported in June 2003 that the visa revocation process needed to be strengthened as an antiterrorism tool and recommended that the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), in conjunction with the Departments of State (State) and Justice, develop specific policies and procedures to ensure that appropriate agencies are notified of revocations based on terrorism grounds and take proper actions. GAO examined whether weaknesses in the visa revocation process identified in its June 2003 report were addressed.

What GAO Recommends

To improve the visa revocation process as an antiterrorism tool, GAO recommends that the Secretaries of Homeland Security and State jointly (1) develop a written governmentwide policy that clearly defines roles and responsibilities and sets performance standards and (2) address outstanding legal and policy issues in this area or provide Congress with specific actions it could take to resolve them. DHS generally concurred with the report and recommendations. State agreed to consult with DHS regarding our recommendations.

www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-04-795.

To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on the link above. For more information, contact Jess T. Ford at (202) 512-4128 or fordj@gao.gov.

What GAO Found

GAO's analysis shows that the Departments of State and Homeland Security took some actions in the summer of 2003 to address weaknesses in the visa revocation process identified in its June 2003 report. However, GAO's review of visas revoked from October to December 2003, including a detailed review of a random sample of 35 cases, showed that weaknesses remained in the implementation of the revocation process, especially in the timely transmission of information among federal agencies. For example:

- Delays existed in matching names of suspected terrorists with names of visa holders and in forwarding necessary information to State. In at least 3 of the 35 cases, it took State 6 months or more to revoke visas after receiving a recommendation to do so.
- In 3 cases, State took a week or longer after deciding to revoke visas to post a lookout or notify DHS. Without these notifications, DHS may not know to investigate those individuals who may be in the country.
- In 10 cases, DHS either failed to notify or took several months to notify immigration investigators that individuals with revoked visas may be in the country. It then took over 2 months for immigration investigators to request field investigations of these individuals.

After GAO initiated its inquiry for this report in January 2004, additional actions were taken to improve the process, including revising procedures and reassessing the process. DHS and State believe these actions will help avoid the delays experienced in the past. In April and May, State revised its procedures and formalized its tracking system for visa revocation cases. In March, DHS developed new written procedures and acted to ensure that immigration investigators are aware of all individuals with revoked visas who may be in the country. State and DHS also took some steps to address legal and policy issues related to visa revocations. In April, the Terrorist Screening Center (TSC), an interagency group organized under the FBI, identified the visa revocation process as a potential homeland security vulnerability and developed an informal process for TSC to handle visa revocation cases. However, weaknesses remain. For example, State's and DHS's procedures are not fully coordinated and lack performance standards, such as specific time frames, for completing each step of the process. Outstanding legal and policy issues continue to exist regarding the removal of individuals based solely on their visa revocation.

Points of Delay Observed in the Visa Revocation Process

Agency	Process	Weakness observed
• Department of State • Terrorist Screening Center	Step 1: Compile intelligence on suspected or actual terrorists	
• Department of State • Terrorist Screening Center	Step 2: Identify visa holders who may be suspected or actual terrorists	• Backlog • Delays
• Department of State	Step 3: Post appropriate lookouts	• Delays
• Department of State	Step 4: Revoke visa	• Delays
• Department of State	Step 5: Notify overseas post, DHS, and others of visa revocation	• Delays
• Department of Homeland Security	Step 6: Determine if alien may already be in the United States	• Delays
• Department of Homeland Security • Federal Bureau of Investigation	Step 7: If alien is in the country, locate, investigate, and (as appropriate), remove the person	• Delays

Source: GAO.