



Highlights of [GAO-08-352T](#), a testimony before the Subcommittee on Intelligence Community Management, Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence, House of Representatives

Why GAO Did This Study

In 2004, Congress passed the Intelligence Reform and Terrorism Prevention Act to reform security clearance processes. Much of GAO's experience in evaluating personnel security clearance processes over the decades has consisted of examining the Department of Defense's (DOD) program, which maintains about 2.5 million clearances on servicemembers, DOD civilian employees, legislative branch employees, and industry personnel working for DOD and 23 other federal agencies. Long-standing delays in processing applications—and other problems in DOD's clearance program—led GAO to designate it a high-risk area in 2005. GAO also has documented clearance-related problems in other agencies.

For this hearing, GAO was asked to identify key factors that could be applied in personnel security clearance reform efforts. To identify key factors, GAO drew upon its past reports and institutional knowledge. For those reports, GAO reviewed laws, executive orders, policies, reports, and other documentation related to the security clearance process; examined samples of cases of personnel granted top secret eligibility; compared documentation in those sampled cases against federal standards; and interviewed a range of cognizant government officials.

To view the full product, click on [GAO-08-352T](#). For more information, contact Brenda S. Farrell at (202) 512-3604 or farrellb@gao.gov.

PERSONNEL CLEARANCES

Key Factors to Consider in Efforts to Reform Security Clearance Processes

What GAO Found

Current and future efforts to reform personnel security clearance processes should consider, among other things, the following four key factors: determining whether clearances are required for positions, incorporating quality control steps throughout the clearance processes, establishing metrics for assessing all aspects of clearance processes, and providing Congress with the long-term funding requirements of security clearance reform. Requesting a clearance for a position in which it will not be needed, or in which a lower-level clearance would be sufficient, will increase both costs and investigative workload unnecessarily. For example, changing the clearance needed for a position from a secret to top secret increases the investigative workload for that position about 20-fold and uses 10 times as many investigative staff hours.

Emphasis on quality in clearance processes could promote positive outcomes, including more reciprocity among agencies in accepting each others' clearances. Building quality throughout clearance processes is important, but government agencies have paid little attention to quality, despite GAO's repeated suggestions to place more emphasis on quality. Even though GAO identified the government's primary metric for assessing quality—the percentage of investigative reports returned for insufficiency during the adjudicative phase—as inadequate by itself in 1999, the Office of Management and Budget and the Office of Personnel Management continue to use that metric. Concerns about the quality of investigative and adjudicative work underlie the continued reluctance of agencies to accept clearances issued by other agencies; as a result, government resources are used to conduct duplicative investigations and adjudications.

Many efforts to monitor clearance processes emphasize measuring timeliness, but additional metrics could provide a fuller picture of clearance processes. The emphasis on timeliness is due in part to recent legislation that provides specific guidelines regarding the speed with which clearances should be completed and requires annual reporting of that information to Congress. GAO has highlighted a variety of metrics in its reports (e.g., completeness of investigative and adjudicative reports, staff's and customers' perceptions of the processes, and the adequacy of internal controls), all of which could add value in monitoring clearance processes and provide better information to allow improved oversight by Congress and the Executive Branch.

Another factor to consider in reform efforts is providing Congress with the long-term funding requirements to implement changes to security clearance processes. DOD's August 2007 congressionally mandated report on industry clearances identified its immediate funding needs but did not include information on the funding requirements for fiscal year 2009 and beyond. The inclusion of less than 2 future years of budgeting data in the DOD report limits Congress's ability to carry out its long-term oversight and appropriations functions pertaining to industry personnel security clearances.