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Highlights

BORDER SECURITY

Improvements Needed to Reduce Time Taken to Adjudicate Visas for Science Students and Scholars

Why GAO Did This Study

Each year thousands of international science students and scholars apply for visas to enter the United States to participate in education and exchange programs. They offer our country diversity and intellectual knowledge and are an economic resource. At the same time, the United States has important national security interests in screening these individuals when they apply for a visa. At a hearing held by the House Committee on Science on March 26, 2003, witnesses raised concern about the length of time it takes for science students and scholars to obtain a visa and about losing top international students to other countries due to delays in the visa process. GAO reviewed 1) how long it takes a science student or scholar from another country to obtain a visa and the factors contributing to the length of time, and 2) what measures are under way to improve the process and decrease the number of pending cases.

What GAO Recommends

GAO is making a recommendation to the Secretary of State, in coordination with the Director of the FBI and the Secretary of Homeland Security, to develop and implement a plan to improve the security check process known as Visas Mantis. State commented that it had taken some action to improve the Visas Mantis process and it would study our recommendation to make further improvements.
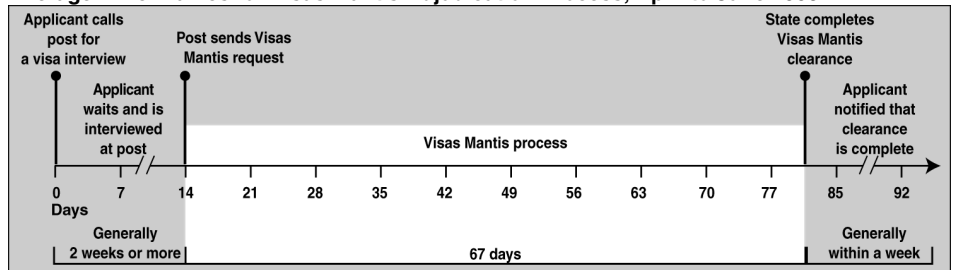
www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-04-371.

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

State Department (State) data are not available on how long it takes for a science student or scholar to obtain a visa. While State has not set specific criteria or time frames for how long the visa process should take, its goal is to adjudicate visas as quickly as possible, consistent with immigration laws and homeland security objectives. During this review, GAO found that the time it takes to adjudicate a visa depends largely on whether an applicant must undergo a security check known as Visas Mantis, which is designed to protect against sensitive technology transfers. Based on a random sample of Visas Mantis cases for science students and scholars sent from posts between April and June 2003, GAO found it took an average of 67 days for the security check to be processed and for State to notify the post. In addition, GAO's visits to posts in China, India, and Russia in September 2003 showed that many Visas Mantis cases had been pending 60 days or more. GAO also found that the way in which Visas Mantis information was disseminated at headquarters made it difficult to resolve some of these cases expeditiously. Furthermore, consular staff at posts GAO visited said they were unsure whether they were contributing to lengthy waits because they lacked clear guidance on when to apply Visas Mantis checks and did not receive feedback on whether they were providing enough information in their Visas Mantis requests. Another factor that may effect the time taken to adjudicate visas for science students and scholars is the wait for an interview. The wait time at posts GAO visited was generally 2 to 3 weeks but could be longer depending on the time of the year.

Average Time Frames for Visas Mantis Adjudication Process, April to June 2003

Source: GAO analysis of State Department documents and visa operations.

While State and Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) officials acknowledged there have been lengthy waits, they report having measures under way that they believe will improve the process and that they are collaborating to identify and resolve outstanding Visas Mantis cases. In addition, State officials told GAO they have invested about $1 million to upgrade the technology for sending Visas Mantis requests. According to State officials, the new system will help to reduce the time it takes to process Visas Mantis cases. But despite State's plans to improve the Visas Mantis process, challenges remain. For example, the FBI's systems will not immediately be interoperable with State's. GAO was unable to assess State's new system since it was not yet functioning at the time of the review.

United States General Accounting Office