HOMELAND SECURITY

Risks Facing Key Border and Transportation Security Program Need to Be Addressed

Why GAO Did This Study

US-VISIT (United States Visitor and Immigrant Status Indicator Technology) is a governmentwide program to enhance national security, facilitate legitimate trade and travel, contribute to the integrity of the U.S. immigration system, and adhere to U.S. privacy laws and policies by

- collecting, maintaining, and sharing information on certain foreign nationals who enter and exit the United States;
- identifying foreign nationals who (1) have overstayed or violated the terms of their visit; (2) can receive, extend, or adjust their immigration status; or (3) should be apprehended or detained by law enforcement officials;
- detecting fraudulent travel documents, verifying traveler identity, and determining traveler admissibility through the use of biometrics; and
- facilitating information sharing and coordination within the border management community.

GAO was asked to testify on its completed work on the nature, status, and management of the US-VISIT program.

www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-04-569T.

To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on the link above. For more information, contact Randolph C. Hite at (202) 512-3870 or hiter@gao.gov.

What GAO Found

The US-VISIT program is inherently risky, both because of the type of program it is and because of the way it is being managed.

- First, US-VISIT is inherently risky because it is to perform a critical, multifaceted mission, its scope is large and complex, it must meet a demanding implementation schedule, and its potential cost is enormous. That is, one critical aspect of the program's mission is to prevent the entry of persons who pose a threat to the United States; failing in this mission could have serious consequences. To carry out this mission, the program aims to control the pre-entry, entry, status, and exit of millions of travelers—a large and complex process. In addition, through legislative mandate, it has challenging milestones (such as the system being implemented at all U.S. ports of entry by December 31, 2005). Finally, DHS estimated that the program would cost $7.2 billion through fiscal year 2014, but this estimate did not include all costs and underestimated some others. All these factors add risk.

- Second, several factors related to the program's management increase the risk of not delivering mission valued commensurate with costs or not delivering defined program capabilities on time and within budget. For example, the program is to rely initially on integrating existing systems with reported problems that could limit US-VISIT performance. In addition, the requirements for interim facilities at high-volume land ports of entry are not only demanding, they are based on assumptions that, if altered, could significantly affect facility plans. Further, DHS did not define the benefits versus costs of near-term program increments (that is, the interim versions of the program that are being pursued while the final version is being defined). Addressing these issues is the responsibility of the program office, which however was not adequately staffed, had not clearly defined roles and responsibilities for its staff, and had not established key processes for managing the acquisition and deployment of US-VISIT.

Despite the program management challenges confronting US-VISIT, the first increment was deployed at the beginning of this year. However, the program still faces a number of risks, including the ones described above. To address these, GAO has made a series of recommendations regarding the planned scope of US-VISIT and its management. Addressing the identified risks increases the likelihood that the deployment of US-VISIT will be successful—the predictable outcome of sound management of a well-justified and designed program.