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Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-05-394](#), a report to congressional requestors.

Why GAO Did This Study

Sharing information with nonfederal officials is an important tool in federal efforts to secure the nation's ports against a potential terrorist attack. The Coast Guard has lead responsibility in coordinating maritime information sharing efforts. The Coast Guard has established area maritime security committees—forums that involve federal and nonfederal officials who identify and address risks in a port. The Coast Guard and other agencies have sought to further enhance information sharing and port security operations by establishing interagency operational centers—command centers that tie together the efforts of federal and nonfederal participants. GAO was asked to review the efforts to see what impact the committees and interagency operational centers have had on improving information sharing and to identify any barriers that have hindered information sharing.

What GAO Recommends

To help ensure that nonfederal officials receive security clearances in a more timely fashion, GAO recommends that the Coast Guard (1) develop formal procedures to use data as a tool to monitor the security clearance program and (2) raise the awareness of nonfederal officials about the process of applying for a clearance. The Department of Homeland Security and the Coast Guard concurred with our recommendations.

www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-05-394. To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on the link above. For more information, contact Margaret Wrightson at (415) 904-2200 or wrightsonm@gao.gov.

MARITIME SECURITY

New Structures Have Improved Information Sharing, but Security Clearance Processing Requires Further Attention

What GAO Found

Area maritime security committees provide a structure that improves information sharing among port security stakeholders. At the four port locations GAO visited, federal and nonfederal stakeholders said that the newly formed committees were an improvement over previous information sharing efforts. The types of information shared included assessments of vulnerabilities at port locations and strategies the Coast Guard intends to use in protecting key infrastructure.

The three interagency operational centers established to date allow for even greater information sharing because the centers operate on a 24-hour-a-day basis, and they receive real-time information from data sources such as radars and sensors. The Coast Guard is planning to develop its own centers—called sector command centers—at up to 40 additional port locations to monitor information and to support its operations. The relationship between the interagency operational centers and the planned expansion of sector command centers remains to be determined.

The major barrier hindering information sharing has been the lack of federal security clearances for nonfederal members of committees or centers. By February 2005—or 4 months after the Coast Guard developed a list of 359 committee members who needed a security clearance—28 of the 359 members had submitted the necessary paperwork for a security clearance. Coast Guard field officials did not clearly understand that they were responsible for contacting nonfederal officials about the clearance process. To deal with this, in early April 2005, the Coast Guard issued guidance to field offices that clarified their role. In addition, the Coast Guard did not have formal procedures that called for the use of data to monitor application trends. Developing such procedures would aid in identifying deficiencies in the future. As the Coast Guard proceeds with its program, another way to improve the submission of paperwork involves educating nonfederal officials about the clearance process.

Interagency Operational Centers Coordinate Harbor Patrols



Source: GAO.