HOMELAND SECURITY

Recommendations to Improve Management of Key Border Security Program Need to Be Implemented

Why GAO Did This Study

The Department of Homeland Security (DHS) has established a program—the U.S. Visitor and Immigrant Status Indicator Technology (US-VISIT)—to collect, maintain, and share information, including biometric identifiers, on selected foreign nationals entering and exiting the United States. US-VISIT uses these identifiers (digital fingerscans and photographs) to screen persons against watch lists and to verify that a visitor is the person who was issued a visa or other travel document. Visitors are also to confirm their departure by having their visas or passports scanned and undergoing fingerscanning at selected air and sea ports of entry (POE).

GAO has made many recommendations to improve the program, all of which DHS has agreed to implement. GAO was asked to report on DHS's progress in responding to 18 of these recommendations.

What GAO Recommends

GAO is closing its existing recommendation related to DHS's assessment of Increment 2B and recommending that DHS explore alternative means to fully assess the impact of US-VISIT entry capabilities on land POEs. In its comments on a draft of this report, DHS stated that it agreed with many areas of the report and disagreed with others. It also concurred with the need to quickly implement GAO's open recommendations.

www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-06-296.

To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on the link above. For more information, contact Randolph C. Hite at (202) 512-3439 or hiter@gao.gov.

What GAO Found

The current status of DHS's implementation of the 18 recommendations is mixed, but progress in critical areas has been slow. DHS has implemented 2 of the recommendations: it defined program staff positions, roles, and responsibilities, and it hired an independent verification and validation contractor. It has also taken steps to implement the other recommendations, partially completing 11 and beginning to implement another 5.

- In September 2003, GAO reported that the program had not assessed the costs and benefits of Increment 1 (which provides entry capabilities to air and sea POEs) and recommended that the program determine whether proposed increments will produce mission value commensurate with cost. In the latest cost-benefit analysis, dated June 23, 2005, the program identified potential costs and benefits for three alternatives for an air and sea exit solution. However, the analysis does not meet key Office of Management and Budget criteria; for example, it does not include a complete uncertainty analysis, which helps to provide decision makers with perspective on the potential variability of the cost and benefit estimates should circumstances change.
- GAO reported in May 2004 and February 2005 that system testing was not based on well-defined test plans and recommended that before testing begins, the program develop and approve test plans meeting certain criteria. However, although the latest test plan did cover many required areas (such as the tests to be performed), it did not adequately trace between test cases and the requirements to be verified by testing. Without complete and traceable test plans, the risk is increased that the deployed system will not perform as intended.
- In May 2004, GAO reported that the program had not assessed its workforce and facility needs for Increment 2B (which extends entry capabilities to the 50 busiest land POEs) and recommended that it do so. Since then, the program evaluated the processing times to issue and process entry/exit forms at 3 of the 50 busiest POEs and concluded that the results showed that no additional staff and only minor facilities modifications were required. However, the scope of the evaluation was limited. Since then, DHS has deployed and implemented Increment 2B capabilities to these 50 POEs, making the collection of predeployment baseline data for these sites impractical. Nonetheless, other alternatives, such as surveying site officials about the increment's impacts, have yet to be explored. Until they are, the program may not be able to accurately project resource needs or make any needed modifications to achieve its goals of minimizing US-VISIT's impact on POE operations, which was the impetus for GAO's recommendation.

DHS attributed the pace of progress to competing demands on time and resources. The longer that US-VISIT takes to implement the recommendations, the greater the risk that the program will not meet its stated goals on time and within budget.