



Highlights of [GAO-08-967](#), a report to congressional requesters

Why GAO Did This Study

The Visa Waiver Program, which enables citizens of participating countries to travel to the United States without first obtaining a visa, has many benefits, but it also has risks. In 2006, GAO found that the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) needed to improve efforts to assess and mitigate these risks. In August 2007, Congress passed the 9/11 Act, which provides DHS with the authority to consider expanding the program to countries whose short-term business and tourism visa refusal rates were between 3 and 10 percent in the prior fiscal year. Countries must also meet certain conditions, and DHS must complete actions to enhance the program's security. GAO has examined DHS's process for expanding the Visa Waiver Program and evaluated the extent to which DHS is assessing and mitigating program risks. GAO reviewed relevant laws and procedures and interviewed agency officials in Washington, D.C., and in U.S. embassies in eight aspiring and three Visa Waiver Program countries.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that DHS establish a transparent process for Visa Waiver Program expansion, and improve and monitor overstay rates for current and aspiring program countries. DHS generally agreed with GAO's recommendations. The Department of Justice (Justice) noted the importance of lost and stolen passport reporting, but did not comment on the recommendations.

To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on [GAO-08-967](#). For more information, contact Jess T. Ford at (202) 512-4128 or fordj@gao.gov.

VISA WAIVER PROGRAM

Actions Are Needed to Improve Management of the Expansion Process, and to Assess and Mitigate Program Risks

What GAO Found

The executive branch is moving aggressively to expand the Visa Waiver Program by the end of 2008, but, in doing so, DHS has not followed a transparent process. DHS did not follow its own November 2007 standard operating procedures, which set forth key milestones to be met before countries are admitted into the program. As a result, Departments of State (State) and Justice and U.S. embassy officials stated that DHS created confusion among interagency partners and aspiring program countries. U.S. embassy officials in several aspiring countries told us it had been difficult to explain the expansion process to foreign counterparts and manage their expectations. State officials said it was also difficult to explain to countries with fiscal year 2007 refusal rates below 10 percent that have signaled interest in joining the program (Croatia, Israel, and Taiwan) why DHS is not negotiating with them, given that DHS is negotiating with several countries that had refusal rates above 10 percent (Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, and Slovakia). Despite this confusion, DHS achieved some security enhancements during the expansion negotiations, including agreements with several aspiring countries on lost and stolen passport reporting. DHS, State, and Justice agreed that a more transparent process is needed to guide future program expansion.

DHS has not fully developed tools to assess and mitigate risks in the Visa Waiver Program. To designate new program countries with refusal rates between 3 and 10 percent, DHS must first make two certifications. First, DHS must certify that it can verify the departure of not less than 97 percent of foreign nationals who exit from U.S. airports. In February 2008, we testified that DHS's plan to meet this provision will not help mitigate program risks because it does not account for data on those who remain in the country beyond their authorized period of stay (overstays). DHS has not yet finalized its methodology for meeting this provision. Second, DHS must certify that the Electronic System for Travel Authorization (ESTA) for screening visa waiver travelers in advance of their travel is "fully operational." While DHS has not announced when it plans to make this certification, it anticipates ESTA authorizations will be required for all visa waiver travelers after January 12, 2009. DHS determined that the law permits it to expand the program to countries with refusal rates between 3 and 10 percent after it makes these two certifications, and after the countries have met the required conditions, but before ESTA is mandatory for all Visa Waiver Program travelers. For DHS to maintain its authority to admit certain countries into the program, it must incorporate biometric indicators (such as fingerprints) into the air exit system by July 1, 2009. However, DHS is unlikely to meet this timeline due to several unresolved issues. In addition, DHS does not fully consider countries' overstay rates when assessing illegal immigration risks in the Visa Waiver Program. Finally, DHS has implemented many recommendations from GAO's 2006 report, including screening U.S.-bound travelers against Interpol's lost and stolen passport database, but has not fully implemented others. Implementing the remaining recommendations is important as DHS moves to expand both the program and the department's oversight responsibilities.