

Statement of

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before the

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Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs
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on

*Evaluating Progress and Identifying Obstacles in Improving
the Federal Government's Security Clearance Process*

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Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee, it is my privilege to testify today on behalf of the Office of Personnel Management (OPM) to provide you with an update of the progress that has been made to improve the timeliness of the security clearance process and reduce the backlog of background investigations.

In his Executive Order dated June 28, 2005, President George W. Bush directed that “agency functions relating to determining eligibility for access to classified national security information shall be appropriately uniform, centralized, efficient, effective, timely, and reciprocal.” OPM Director Linda Springer takes that direction very seriously and has included in OPM’s Strategic and Operational Plan specific goals to ensure we accomplish the expectations set by the President and by the Congress in the Intelligence Reform and Terrorism Prevention Act of 2004 (IRTPA).

Background

OPM's mission is to ensure the Federal Government has an effective civilian workforce. To accomplish this mission, OPM provides background investigation products and services to agencies to assist them with making security clearance or suitability decisions on civilian, as well as military and contractor personnel. OPM conducts different levels of investigations for various types of positions in the Federal Government. The investigations range from the minimum level of investigation for positions that require a Confidential or Secret clearance, to extensive field investigations for those that require a Top Secret clearance.

At OPM, the division responsible for conducting background investigations is our Federal Investigative Services Division (FISD), headquartered in Boyers, Pennsylvania. This division supports over 100 Federal agencies and has security offices across the country and worldwide. Our automated processing systems and vast network of field investigators handle a high volume of cases. In fact, we expect we will have conducted over 1.7 million investigations by the end of this year.

As an attachment to my prepared testimony today, I have included a chart which further outlines the various steps in the security clearance process, from the initial request for a clearance through the investigations phase to the adjudications and clearance determination phase. Included in this chart is a column identifying the timeliness goals for each step which I will describe in more detail in my testimony.

Update on the investigation and security clearance process

Since 2005, OPM has had lead responsibility for about 90 percent of all personnel background investigations for the Federal Government. This percentage reached that level as a result of statutory authorization concerning transfer of Department of Defense (DoD) background work. Our authorities in this area were formalized as a result of the President's Executive Order which led to operational designations from the Office of Management and Budget (OMB). We have been working closely with OMB, which has the lead for policy setting on this issue. We also are working very closely with the major clearance granting agencies to meet the timeliness requirements under IRTPA.

Mr. Chairman, as you may recall, when the joint OMB-OPM Performance Improvement Plan was provided to your subcommittee in November of 2005, it addressed four critical areas of the investigation and security clearance process: workload projections, timeliness and quality of agency submissions of investigations, investigations timeliness, and adjudications timeliness.

Since that time, I am happy to report that significant progress has been made in improving overall timeliness and reducing the inventory of cases, and we are continuing to work aggressively to resolve any issues that are hindering the background investigations process.

OPM's automated processing system, known as "PIPS", effectively tracks each step of the security clearance process -- from the time the subject provides the necessary data and forms, to the date the agency makes an adjudicative decision. This system provides full transparency for the timeliness of each subject's clearance. Additionally, each quarter we provide OMB and the

clearance granting agencies a report on the progress that has been made to meet the four areas I just outlined in our plan goals. Let me elaborate on each of these four areas:

Workload projections: To staff the investigative program responsibly, we need agencies to work toward projecting their annual need within a margin of 5 percent. For Fiscal Year 2007, we are finding that agency submissions to OPM thus far have been less than originally predicted with respect to initial security clearance investigations. Overall, however, the total number of agency submissions for all types of investigations – both for clearances and for suitability decisions -- have increased.

Timeliness and quality of agency submissions of investigations: The first step in improving the timeliness of the investigation and security clearance process is timely and accurate submission of the subject's background information to OPM. The expanded use of the electronic Questionnaires for Investigations Processing (e-QIP) by submitting agencies has improved timeliness and has lowered the rate of submissions OPM rejects because they contain incomplete or inconsistent information. Overall use of the electronic form has increased substantially to 70 percent this fiscal year, with the Department of Transportation, Department of Commerce, and Department of Education currently meeting the goal of 100 percent e-QIP usage.

In March 2007, submissions for initial clearance investigations through e-QIP averaged 14 days while hardcopy submissions averaged 30 days. This is an improvement over the 35 to 55 calendar days reported in November 2005, with e-QIP submissions meeting the performance goal of all submissions within 14 days. In addition, the rejection rate is currently 9 percent, and

we are confident this number can be reduced to the performance goal of less than 5 percent with the expanded use of e-QIP.

Investigations Timeliness: OPM continues to make significant progress in reducing the amount of time it takes to complete the investigations for initial security clearances. In April 2006, the timeliness for investigations used to support Top Secret clearances averaged 171 days, and investigations used to support Secret or Confidential clearances averaged 145 days. Looking at the initial clearance investigations received during the first quarter of FY 2007, 80 percent of the 137,925 initial clearance investigations received from October through December are now being closed with an average processing time of 78 days, so we are seeing significant improvement. In fact, 27,821 of these were closed in less than 45 days.

In addition, we have made tremendous progress in reducing the inventory of both initial and reinvestigations that were delayed in process. In October 2006, we had 385,695 pending national security initial and reinvestigations in process. As of April 28, 2007, the pending inventory of investigations received prior to FY 2007 was reduced by 74 percent to 100,869 that remain pending. Overall, we have been processing over 13,000 more investigations per month than we are receiving, rapidly reducing the over-aged portion of this inventory.

We believe these figures demonstrate that we not only have adequate capacity to handle new workloads, but that we have built sufficient capacity to maintain processing timeliness on initial clearance investigations while improving timeliness on reinvestigations. Continued performance at this level meets the statutory goal for applications for initial clearance investigations and we

believe such performance will result in elimination of the reinvestigations backlog by October 1, 2007, as planned.

The improvement in timeliness can be attributed in part to our increased staffing and productivity by our field agents. Currently, we are maintaining a staff level of over 9,200 employees and contractors devoted to the background investigations program. In addition, we have worked aggressively with national, state, and local record repositories to improve their timeliness providing information critical to the process.

While improving the timeliness of investigations, we have been vigilant in maintaining the quality of our investigative products. We have developed additional internal quality control processes to ensure that the quality of completed investigations continues to meet the national investigative standards and the needs of the adjudication community. Overall, less than 1 percent of all completed investigations are returned to OPM from the adjudicating agencies for quality deficiencies.

We have also focused resources to improve the timeliness of required international coverage. We began deploying field agents overseas in August 2005, and at any given time, there are approximately 60 investigators working in over 71 locations around the world. We are also using State Department resources to assist with international coverage. Because of these efforts, we reduced the backlog of cases needing overseas coverage by more than 60 percent.

Adjudications Timeliness: During the second quarter of FY 2006, agencies averaged 78 days to adjudicate their investigations with 9 percent done within 30 days of completion of the investigation.

During the first quarter of FY 2007, agencies reported 127,905 adjudications to OPM. Of these, 80 percent were reported as adjudicated in an average of 33 days which includes up to 14 days in mail and handling time between OPM and the requesting agency. OPM continues to work with the agencies to improve the time it takes to deliver completed investigations and to report their adjudication actions. These efforts include the development of an imaging system to electronically transmit the completed investigations to the adjudications facility and linking an agency's in-house record system to OPM's data base for electronic updating of their actions. We are currently piloting electronic transmission with nine agencies, and expect production deployment in October 2007. In FY 2008, we expect that this imaging system will be used to migrate from hardcopy pending case files to a virtual case file system which will further streamline processing times within OPM and across Government.

Mr. Chairman, as I hope my testimony has shown, OPM is making significant progress to improve the overall timeliness of the security clearance process while ensuring we produce quality investigative work that will help agencies make decisions on whether an individual working for the Federal Government can be trusted if given access to national security information. While we are pleased with the improvements that have been made, we recognize that there is more work to be done. We will continue to work with OMB and the clearance granting agencies in order to meet the requirements Congress and the President have set on this critical issue.

This concludes my remarks. I would be happy to answer any questions the Subcommittee may have.