

Highlights of **GAO-07-85**, a report to congressional requesters

### Why GAO Did This Study

To document the interactions of aliens with the Department of Homeland Security’s (DHS) United States Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) and other government entities, USCIS creates alien files, or A-files. While deemed critical, especially in making citizenship decisions, A-files are sometimes missing during adjudications. In 2002, naturalization was granted to an alien whose A-file was missing and who was later found to be associated with a terrorist organization. GAO focused its review on (1) how often USCIS adjudicates naturalization applications without an A-file and why, (2) the effect that missing A-files can have on the adjudication process, and (3) steps taken to help mitigate the risk of missing A-files. To address these questions, GAO interviewed officials and staff from USCIS and reviewed relevant data, policies, and procedures related to processing naturalization applications and the automated file-tracking system DHS established to track the movement of A-files.

### What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that USCIS require adjudicators to record whether an A-file was available in naturalization adjudications and, with other DHS users of A-files, determine why staff are not complying with file-tracking procedures and correct any deficiencies. In its comments, DHS agreed with our recommendations.

[www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-07-85](http://www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-07-85).

To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on the link above. For more information, contact Paul Jones at (202) 512-8777 or JonesPL@gao.gov.

## IMMIGRATION BENEFITS

### Additional Efforts Needed to Help Ensure Alien Files Are Located when Needed

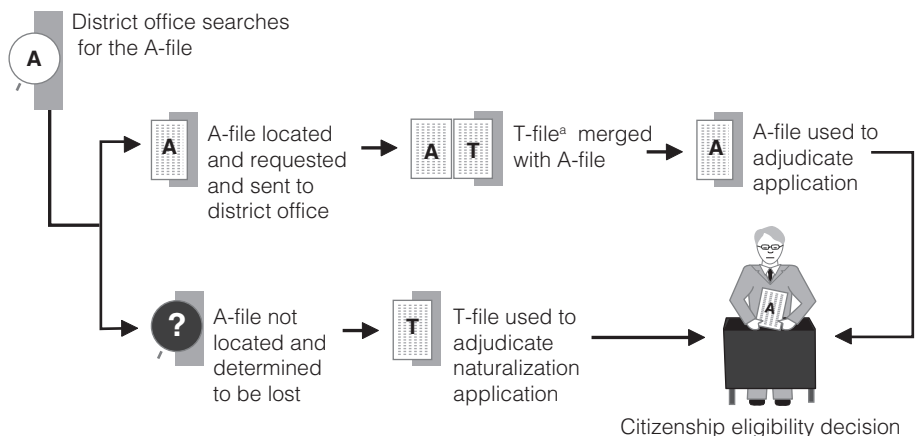
#### What GAO Found

A-files were not available to adjudicate naturalization applications in a small percentage of cases. GAO found that of the naturalization applications adjudicated in 2005, about 30,000—or about 4 percent of them—may have been adjudicated without A-files. However, this number may be less because USCIS staff are not required to record whether an A-file was available. USCIS officials said that a major reason A-files were not available for naturalization application adjudications is that staff are not using the automated file-tracking system. USCIS officials suggested that staff might not be using the automated file-tracking system for lack of sufficient training on how to use the system, while local management may not be adequately emphasizing the importance of complying with A-file tracking policies and procedures.

Missing A-files can have an impact on the process of adjudicating naturalization applications in several ways. For example, when an A-file is not available at the location indicated in the automated file-tracking system, additional time is spent trying to locate the file, which slows the adjudication process and applicants may wait longer for USCIS to process their application. In addition, missing A-files can hinder USCIS’ s ability to uncover immigration benefit fraud and limit DHS’ ability to take enforcement actions.

USCIS has steps in place to help mitigate the risk of adjudicating a naturalization application without an A-file. These steps include verifying the applicant’s lawful admission to the United States and conducting extra supervisory reviews to ensure that naturalization processing procedures have been followed.

**Additional Time Spent Locating A-files when A-files Are Not Initially Received at USCIS District Offices**



<sup>a</sup>When an A-file is not located, a temporary file, or T-file, is created.

Source: GAO.