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Highlights

Highlights of GAO-04-1001, a report to the Chairman, Committee on Government Reform, House of Representatives

BORDER SECURITY

State Department Rollout of Biometric Visas on Schedule, but Guidance Is Lagging

Why GAO Did This Study

As a complement to the Department of Homeland Security's (DHS) United States Visitor and Immigrant Status Indicator Technology (US-VISIT) program—a governmentwide program to better control and monitor the entry, visa status, and exit of visitors—the State Department (State) is implementing the Biometric Visa Program at all 207 overseas consulates by October 26, 2004. This program, required by the Enhanced Border Security and Visa Entry Reform Act of 2002, requires that all persons applying for U.S. visas have certain biometrics (fingerprints) and a digital photograph collected during the visa application interview. This information must be cleared through the DHS Automated Biometric Identification System (IDENT) before an applicant can receive a visa. GAO reviewed State's rollout of the program, including its implementation progress and how State and DHS envision the program being used to help adjudicate visas.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that DHS and State develop and provide to consular posts guidance on how the program should be used to help adjudicate visas and that State direct each consular post to develop an implementation plan based on this guidance.

DHS and State generally concurred with these recommendations.
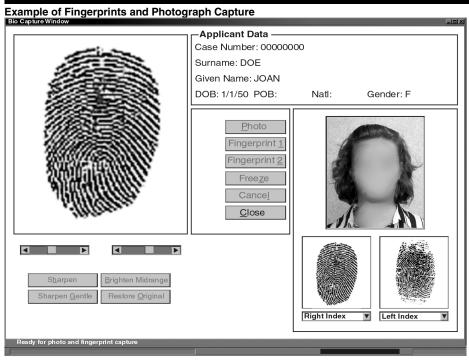
www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-04-1001.

To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on the link above. For more information, contact Jess Ford at (202) 512-4128 or fordj@gao.gov.

What GAO Found

State is installing the equipment and software for the Biometric Visa Program on schedule and will likely meet the October 26, 2004, implementation deadline. However, DHS and State have not fully developed guidance for the program's use. As of September 1, 2004, State had installed program hardware and software at 201 out of a total of 207 overseas posts and plans to complete the installation at the remaining 6 posts by September 30. The posts with the program are now collecting fingerprints of each visa applicant and processing the prints through the DHS IDENT database. Although the technology installation has progressed smoothly, DHS and State have not developed and not provided comprehensive guidance that includes directions to consular officers on when in the visa process prints are to be scanned and when and how information from the IDENT database on visa applicants should be considered by consular officers. In the absence of such guidance, GAO found that consular officers are unclear on how to use the program and the information available from IDENT on visa applicants. For example, officers are unclear about whether fingerprints of visa applicants should be collected before or during the visa interview, whether information on visa applicants from the DHS database should be considered by the visa-adjudicating officer during or after the interview, and who should have responsibility for reviewing the IDENT information before visa issuance. Answers to these questions could significantly affect how each post manages workflows and processes visa applicants, which could have staffing and resource implications.

Example of Fingerprints and Photograph Capture

Source: GAO analysis of State data.

United States Government Accountability Office