



Highlights of [GAO-05-859](#), a report to congressional committees

BORDER SECURITY

Strengthened Visa Process Would Benefit from Improvements in Staffing and Information Sharing

Why GAO Did This Study

GAO reported in October 2002 that the visa process needed to be strengthened as an antiterrorism tool and recommended that the Secretary of State, in consultation with appropriate agencies, (1) develop a clear policy on the role of national security in the visa process, (2) create more comprehensive guidance on how consular officers should screen against potential terrorists, (3) fundamentally reassess staffing requirements, and (4) revamp and expand consular training. This report examines State's and other agencies' progress in implementing changes to the visa process since 2002, in the areas of policy and guidance; consular resources, including staffing and training; and information sharing.

What GAO Recommends

To further improve the visa process as an antiterrorism tool and facilitate legitimate travel, GAO is making seven recommendations to the Secretaries of State and Homeland Security in the areas of visa policy, consular resources, and information sharing. GAO is also suggesting that Congress consider reviewing visa adjudicators' access to FBI criminal history information.

State agreed with most of the conclusions, but did not agree on the need for a comprehensive staffing plan. DHS agreed with the conclusions, and the Department of Justice provided information on steps it is taking to improve interagency information sharing.

www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-05-859.

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

What GAO Found

The Department of State (State), the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), and other agencies have taken many steps to strengthen the visa process as an antiterrorism tool. Led by the Assistant Secretary of State for Consular Affairs, consular officers have received clear guidance on the importance of national security. We observed that consular officers at eight posts, including those of interest to antiterrorism efforts, regard security as their top priority, while recognizing the importance of facilitating legitimate travel. State has also increased hiring of consular officers, targeted recruitment of foreign language speakers, revamped consular training with a focus on counterterrorism, and increased resources to combat visa fraud. Further, intelligence and law enforcement agencies have shared more information for consular officers' use in conducting name checks on visa applicants.

Additional issues require attention. For example, State has not consistently updated the consular and visa chapters of the *Foreign Affairs Manual* to reflect recent policy changes. Consular officers we interviewed also said that guidance is needed on DHS staff's roles and responsibilities overseas. Actions are also needed to ensure that State has sufficient experienced staff with the necessary language skills at key consular posts. In particular, staffing shortages at the supervisory level place a burden on new officers. In February 2005, we found that the visa sections in critical posts in Saudi Arabia and Egypt were staffed with first-tour officers and no permanent midlevel visa chiefs to provide guidance. Further improvements in training and fraud prevention are also needed, and additional information from FBI criminal history files would allow consular officers to help facilitate efficient visa adjudication.

Improvements and Remaining Challenges to the Visa Process

Issue	Improvements	Issues requiring attention
Policy	Clarified policies and issued new guidance on national security concerns	Additional guidance needed on DHS and State interagency protocols Update the <i>Foreign Affairs Manual</i>
Staffing	Increased hiring and focused recruitment	Shortage of midlevel officers and unreliable data on interview wait times
Training	Revamped and expanded consular training with an emphasis on counterterrorism	Courses needed on terrorism travel trends, fraud prevention, and post-specific counterterrorism techniques
Fraud prevention	Increased antifraud resources for consular officers	Standard criteria needed to identify high-fraud posts
Information sharing	Increased information from intelligence and law enforcement agencies	Consular officers need additional information from FBI criminal history files to adjudicate visas more efficiently

Source: GAO.