



Highlights of [GAO-08-776T](#), a testimony before the Subcommittee on Oversight of Government Management, the Federal Workforce, and the District of Columbia, Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs, U.S. Senate

Why GAO Did This Study

Since 1974, GAO has examined personnel security clearance processes and acquired a historical view of key factors to consider in reform efforts. GAO placed the Department of Defense's (DOD) personnel security clearance program, which represents 80 percent of federal government clearances, on its high-risk list in 2005 due to long-standing problems. These problems include incomplete investigative reports from the Office of Personnel Management (OPM), the agency primarily responsible for providing clearance investigation services; the granting of some clearances by DOD adjudicators even when required data were missing from the investigative reports used to make such determinations; and delays in completing clearance processing. Delays can lead to a heightened risk of disclosure of classified information, additional costs and delays in completing related contracts, and problems retaining qualified personnel. DOD has reported on these continuing delays. However, there has been recent high-level governmentwide attention to improving the process, including establishing a team to develop a reformed federal government security clearance process.

This statement addresses four key factors that should be considered in personnel security clearance reforms. This statement draws on GAO's past work, which included reviews of clearance-related documents and interviews of senior officials at DOD and OPM.

To view the full product, click on [GAO-08-776T](#). For more information, contact Brenda S. Farrell at (202) 512-3604 or farrellb@gao.gov.

PERSONNEL CLEARANCES

Key Factors for Reforming the Security Clearance Process

What GAO Found

Efforts to reform personnel security clearance processes should consider, among other things, the following four key factors: (1) a strong requirements-determination process, (2) quality in all clearance processes, (3) metrics to provide a fuller picture of clearance processes, and (4) long-term funding requirements of security clearance reform. In February 2008, GAO noted that a sound requirements process is important because requesting a clearance for a position in which it will not be needed, or in which a lower-level clearance would be sufficient, will increase both costs and investigative workload unnecessarily. For example, the cost of obtaining and maintaining a top secret clearance for 10 years is approximately 30 times greater than the cost of obtaining and maintaining a secret clearance for the same period. Also, changing a position's clearance level from secret to top secret increases the investigative workload for that position about 20-fold.

Building quality throughout the clearance process could promote positive outcomes, including more reciprocity governmentwide. However, agencies have paid little attention to this factor despite GAO's 2006 recommendation to place more emphasis on quality. For example, the Office of Management and Budget's (OMB) February 2007 report on security clearances documented quality with a single metric in only one of the six phases of the process. Further, OMB did not discuss the development or existence of any metric measuring the level of quality in security clearance processes or products in its February 2008 report. Concerns about the quality of investigative and adjudicative work underlie the continued reluctance of agencies to accept clearances issued by other agencies; thus, government resources may be used to conduct duplicative investigations and adjudications.

Federal agencies' efforts to monitor clearance processes emphasize timeliness, but additional metrics should be developed to provide a fuller picture of the performance of the clearance process. GAO has highlighted a variety of metrics in its reports (e.g., completeness of investigative reports, staff's and customers' perceptions of the process, and the adequacy of internal controls), all of which could add value in monitoring clearance processes. The emphasis on timeliness is due in part to the Intelligence Reform and Terrorism Prevention Act of 2004 which provides guidelines for the speed of completing clearances and requires annual reporting of that information to Congress.

Providing Congress with the long-term funding requirements to implement changes to security clearance processes could enable more-informed congressional oversight. Reform efforts should identify long-term funding requirements to implement proposed changes, so that decision makers can compare and prioritize alternate reform proposals in times of fiscal constraints. The absence of long-term funding requirements to implement reforms would limit decision makers'—in the executive and legislative branches—ability to carry out their budgetary development and oversight functions.