



Highlights of [GAO-09-488](#), a report to congressional requesters

## Why GAO Did This Study

Personnel security clearances are used to verify that national security information—which in some cases could cause exceptionally grave damage to national security if disclosed—is entrusted only to those who have proven reliability and loyalty to the nation. In response to long-standing problems with timeliness and backlogs, Congress mandated clearance reforms as part of the Intelligence Reform and Terrorism Prevention Act of 2004 (IRTPA), and since 2005 the Department of Defense's (DOD) clearance program has remained on GAO's high-risk list despite improvements in timeliness. In 2007, a Joint Reform Team, led by the Office of Management and Budget (OMB), was established to improve the clearance process across the government. GAO was asked to review the extent to which reform efforts (1) align with key practices for organizational transformations and (2) address identified factors for reforming the personnel security clearance process. To assess these objectives, GAO compared joint reform reports to key transformation practices and essential factors for reform.

## What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that OMB establish a strategic framework that includes outcome-focused performance measures, clear roles and responsibilities for information technology implementation, and estimated long-term costs. In commenting on this draft, OMB partially concurred with GAO's recommendation.

View [GAO-09-488](#) or [key components](#). For more information, contact Brenda S. Farrell at (202) 512-3604 or [farrellb@gao.gov](mailto:farrellb@gao.gov).

# PERSONNEL SECURITY CLEARANCES

## An Outcome-Focused Strategy Is Needed to Guide Implementation of the Reformed Clearance Process

### What GAO Found

Initial joint reform efforts have, in part, aligned with key practices for organizational transformation, such as having committed leadership and a dedicated implementation team, but reports issued by the Joint Reform Team do not provide a strategic framework that contains important elements of successful transformation, including long-term goals with related outcome-focused performance measures to show progress, or identify obstacles to progress and possible remedies. To communicate plans of the reform efforts, the Joint Reform Team issued three reports, including an initial reform report in April 2008 that presented a new 7-step process design, a December 2008 update, and a March 2009 Enterprise Information Technology Strategy. Consistent with practices that GAO has previously identified, the executive branch established a Performance Accountability Council to achieve reform goals, drive implementation, and oversee the reform. Membership on this council currently includes senior executive leaders from 11 federal agencies. Further, an executive order designates OMB's Deputy Director for Management as the chair of this council. However, it is difficult to gauge progress of reform, or determine if corrective action is needed, because the council, through the Joint Reform Team, has not established a method for evaluating the progress of the reform efforts. In the absence of a strategic framework that is outcome focused, with clearly defined performance measures, the Joint Reform Team is not in a position to demonstrate to decision makers the extent of progress that it is making toward achieving its desired outcomes.

The personnel security clearance joint reform reports that GAO reviewed collectively do begin to address essential factors for reforming the security clearance process, which represents positive steps. GAO's prior work and IRTPA identified several factors key to reforming the clearance process. These include (1) developing a sound requirements determination process, (2) engaging in governmentwide reciprocity, (3) building of quality into every step of the process, (4) consolidating information technology, and (5) identifying and reporting long-term funding requirements. However, the Joint Reform Team's information technology strategy does not yet define roles and responsibilities for implementing a new automated capability which is intended to be a cross-agency collaborative initiative. GAO's prior work has stressed the importance of defining these roles and responsibilities when initiating cross-agency initiatives. Also, the joint reform reports do not contain any information on initiatives that will require funding, determine how much they will cost, or identify potential funding sources. Without long-term funding requirements, decision makers in both the executive and legislative branches will lack important information for comparing and prioritizing proposals for reforming the clearance processes. The reform effort's success will be dependent upon the extent to which the Joint Reform Team is able to fully address these key factors moving forward.