TRANSPORTATION WORKER IDENTIFICATION CREDENTIAL

Progress Made in Enrolling Workers and Activating Credentials but Evaluation Plan Needed to Help Inform the Implementation of Card Readers

Why GAO Did This Study

The Transportation Worker Identification Credential (TWIC) program, which is managed by the Department of Homeland Security's (DHS) Transportation Security Administration (TSA) and the U.S. Coast Guard, requires maritime workers who access secure areas of transportation facilities to obtain a biometric identification card to access these facilities. A federal regulation set a national compliance deadline of April 15, 2009. TSA is conducting a pilot program to test the use of TWICs with biometric card readers in part to inform the development of a second TWIC regulation. GAO was asked to evaluate TSA's and the Coast Guard's progress and related challenges in implementing TWIC, and to evaluate the management challenges, if any, TSA, Coast Guard, and DHS face in executing the TWIC pilot test. GAO reviewed TWIC enrollment and implementation documents and conducted site visits or interviewed officials at the seven pilot program sites.

What GAO Recommends

Among other things, GAO recommends that TSA expedite the development of contingency and disaster recovery plans and system(s), and TSA and Coast Guard develop a detailed evaluation plan to help ensure that needed information on biometrics will result from the pilot. DHS generally concurred and discussed actions to implement the recommendations, but these actions will not fully address the intent of all of the recommendations.

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What GAO Found

TSA, Coast Guard, and the maritime industry took a number of steps to enroll 1,121,461 workers in the TWIC program, or over 93 percent of the estimated 1.2 million users, by the April 15, 2009, national compliance deadline, but experienced challenges that resulted in delays. TSA and the Coast Guard implemented a staggered compliance approach whereby each of 42 regions impacted by TWIC were required to meet TWIC compliance prior to the national compliance date. Further, based on lessons learned from its early experiences with enrollment and activation, and to prepare for an expected surge in TWIC enrollments and activations as compliance dates approached, TSA and its contractor increased the number of stations available for TWIC enrollment and activation. While 93 percent of users were enrolled in TWIC by the compliance date, TSA data shows that some workers experienced delays in receiving TWICs. Among reasons for the delays, a power failure in October 2008 occurred at the government facility that processes TWIC data. The power failure resulted in credential activations being halted until late November 2008, and the inability to set new personal identification numbers (PIN) on 410,000 TWICs issued prior to the power failure. While TSA officials stated that they are taking steps to develop a disaster recovery plan by next year and a system to support disaster recovery by 2012, until such a plan and system(s) are put in place, TWIC systems remain vulnerable to similar disasters. While the full cost of this power failure is unknown, based on TSA provided figures, it could cost the government and industry up to approximately $26 million to replace all affected TWIC cards.

While TSA has made progress in incorporating management best practices to execute the TWIC pilot, TSA faces two management challenges in ensuring the successful execution of the pilot test aimed at informing Congress and the development of the second TWIC regulation. First, TSA has faced challenges in using the TWIC pilot schedule to guide the pilot and accurately identify the pilot's completion date. TSA has improved its scheduling practices in executing the pilot, but weaknesses remain, such as not capturing all pilot activities in the schedule, that may adversely impact the schedule's usefulness as a management tool and for communicating with pilot participants in the maritime industry. Second, shortfalls in TWIC pilot planning have hindered TSA and Coast Guard's efforts to ensure that the pilot is broadly representative of deployment conditions and will yield the information needed—such as information on the operational impacts of deploying biometric card readers and their costs—to accurately inform Congress and the second rule. This is in part because these agencies have not developed an evaluation plan that fully identifies the scope of the pilot and specifies how the information from the pilot will be analyzed. The current evaluation plans describe data collection methods but do not identify the evaluation criteria and methodology to be used in analyzing the pilot data once collected. A well-developed, sound evaluation plan would help TSA and the Coast Guard determine how the data are to be analyzed to measure the project's performance.

_____ **United States Government Accountability Office**