

Why GAO Did This Study

Since 2003, the Department of Homeland Security's (DHS) Visa Security Program (VSP) has participated in the visa process by reviewing applications at some embassies and consulates, with the intention of preventing individuals who pose a threat from entering the United States. The attempted bombing of an airline on December 25, 2009, renewed concerns about the security of the visa process and the effectiveness of the VSP. For this report GAO assessed (1) the ability of DHS's Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) to measure the program's objectives and performance, (2) challenges to VSP operations, and (3) ICE efforts to expand the VSP program. To evaluate the VSP, we reviewed VSP data, guidance, and the ICE's 5-year expansion plan. We also interviewed ICE officials, and observed VSP operations at 6 posts overseas.

What GAO Recommends

GAO made several recommendations designed to address weaknesses we identified in the VSP. DHS concurred with the recommendations that the VSP provide consular officer training and develop a plan to provide more VSP coverage at high-risk posts. DHS did not concur with the recommendations that the VSP collect comprehensive data on all performance measures and track the time spent on visa security activities. GAO continues to maintain that these recommendations are necessary to accurately assess VSP performance.

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BORDER SECURITY

DHS's Visa Security Program Needs to Improve Performance Evaluation and Better Address Visa Risk Worldwide

What GAO Found

ICE cannot accurately assess progress toward its VSP objectives. ICE outlined three primary objectives of the VSP—identifying and counteracting potential terrorist threats from entering the United States, identifying not-yet-known threats, and maximizing law enforcement and counterterrorism value of the visa process—and established performance measures intended to assess VSP performance, including situations where VSP agents provide information that results in a consular officer's decision to deny a visa. ICE's VSP tracking system, used to collect data on VSP activities, does not gather comprehensive data on all the performance measures needed to evaluate VSP mission objectives. In addition, data collected by ICE on VSP activities were limited by inconsistencies. ICE upgraded its VSP tracking system in April 2010 to collect additional performance data, but the system still does not collect data on all the performance measures. Therefore, ICE's ability to comprehensively evaluate the performance of the VSP remains limited. While ICE can provide some examples demonstrating the success of VSP operations, ICE has not reported on the progress made toward achieving all VSP objectives.

Several challenges to the implementation of the VSP affected operations overseas. DHS and the Department of State (State) have issued some guidance, including several memorandums of understanding, to govern VSP operations. However, some posts experienced difficulties because of the limited guidance regarding interactions between State officials and VSP agents, which has led to tensions between the VSP agents and State officials at some posts. In addition, most VSP posts have not developed standard operating procedures for VSP operations, leading to inconsistency among posts. Additionally, the mandated advising and training of consular officers by VSP agents varies from post to post, and at some posts consular officers received no training. Finally, VSP agents perform a variety of investigative and administrative functions beyond their visa security responsibilities that sometimes slow or limit visa security activities, and ICE does not track this information in the VSP tracking system, making it unable to identify the time spent on these activities.

In 2007, ICE developed a 5-year expansion plan for the VSP, but ICE has not fully followed or updated the plan. For instance, ICE did not establish 9 posts identified for expansion in 2009 and 2010. Furthermore, the expansion plan states that risk analysis is the primary input to VSP site selection, and ICE, with input from State, ranked visa-issuing posts by visa risk, which includes factors such as the terrorist threat and vulnerabilities present at each post. However, 11 of the top 20 high-risk posts identified in the expansion plan are not covered by the VSP. Furthermore, ICE has not taken steps to address visa risk in high-risk posts that do not have a VSP presence. Although the expansion of the VSP is limited by a number of factors, such as budgetary limitations or limited embassy space, ICE has not identified possible alternatives that would provide the additional security of VSP review at those posts that do not have a VSP presence.