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The Honorable George V. Voinovich
Chairman
Subcommittee on Oversight of Government Management,
the Federal Workforce, and the District of Columbia
Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs
United States Senate

*Subject: DOD Personnel Clearances: Questions and Answers for the Record
Following the Second in a Series of Hearings on Fixing the Security Clearance
Process*

On November 9, 2005, I testified before your subcommittee at a hearing on “Access Delayed: Fixing the Security Clearance Process, Part II.” This letter responds to three questions for the record that you posed. The questions and my responses follow.

1. What steps will GAO take to ensure that OPM, OMB, and the federal Intelligence Community are meeting the goals and objectives outlined in the OPM security clearance strategic plan?

We will continue to assess and monitor the Department of Defense’s (DOD) personnel security clearance program, including DOD’s progress in meeting the goals and objectives outlined in the governmentwide plan. At this time, we have no ongoing or future work that would assess whether the federal intelligence community is meeting the goals and objectives of the government’s plan.¹ We are currently reviewing the timeliness and completeness of DOD’s and the Office of Personnel Management’s (OPM) processes used to determine whether industry personnel are eligible to hold a top secret clearance. We will report that information to your subcommittee this fall. Also, our standard steps of monitoring programs on our high-risk list require that we evaluate the progress that agencies make toward being removed from GAO’s high-risk list. Finally, we continuously monitor our recommendations to agencies to determine whether active steps are being taken to overcome program deficiencies.

¹For us to undertake such work would require the sponsorship of the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence or the House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence. While we have the authority to do such work, we lack the cooperation we need to get our job done in that area. As a result, unless and until we receive such cooperation, and given GAO’s limited recourse, we will continue our long-standing policy of not doing work that relates directly to intelligence matters unless requested to do so by one of the select intelligence committees.

2. As you mentioned in your statement, a commitment from leadership is a key indicator for successful implementation of any strategic plan. At this point, do you believe that OMB and OPM have made the necessary commitment to improve the security clearance process? What steps should the Administration take to ensure that their security clearance initiatives are transparent and will continue past the Bush Administration?

We have been encouraged by the commitment that the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) and OPM have demonstrated in the development of a governmentwide plan to address clearance-related problems. Also, the OMB Deputy Director met with GAO officials to discuss OMB's general strategy for addressing the problems that led to our high-risk designation for DOD's clearance program. Demonstrating strong management commitment and top leadership support to address a known risk is one of the requirements for removing DOD's clearance program from GAO's high-risk list. We are concerned about whether such progress will continue since Executive Order No. 13381 has not been extended and no other office has begun to assume that leadership role for the period after the order expires on July 1, 2006. While OPM has provided some leadership in assisting OMB with the development of the governmentwide plan, OPM may not be in a position to assume OMB's leadership role for a variety of reasons. These reasons include (1) the governmentwide plan lists many management challenges facing OPM and the Associate Director of its investigation unit, such as establishing a presence to conduct overseas investigations and adjusting the investigative workforce to the increasing demand for clearances; (2) adjudication of personnel security clearances and determination of which organizational positions require such clearances are outside the current emphases for OPM; and (3) agencies' disputes with OPM may require a high-level third party to mediate a resolution that is perceived to be impartial.

OMB and OPM could enhance the transparency and likelihood that the initiatives would be continued by improving communications with clearance-process stakeholders and correcting the deficiencies in the governmentwide plan that I outlined in my November testimony and mention later in this correspondence. Communication problems may be limiting governmentwide efforts to improve the personnel security clearance process. For example, until recently, OPM had not officially shared its investigator's handbook with DOD adjudicators. Adjudicators raised concerns that without knowing what was required by the investigator's handbook, they could not fully understand how investigations were conducted and the investigative reports that form the basis for their adjudicative decisions. Similarly, the transparency of the initiatives may be limited if the governmentwide plan is not communicated and available to all stakeholders, including investigators, adjudicators, agency and company officials needing personnel with clearances, and those seeking clearances. Also, another step in increasing the probability that the initiatives will continue into the future would be to enhance the effectiveness and efficiency of the initiatives by correcting previously identified deficiencies. Perseverance by the administration in implementing our recommended solutions and continued oversight and action by Congress are essential elements to removing DOD's program from our high-risk list and improving clearance processes governmentwide.

3. Do you think that OPM's plan includes the necessary performance goals and milestones to streamline the security clearance process in order to get this removed from the high-risk list?

As I said in my November testimony, the plan represents an important step toward addressing some long-standing concerns GAO has raised about DOD's personnel security clearance process, but much remains to be done to develop a more comprehensive plan for improving the timeliness and quality of the security clearance process. My testimony noted that the plan did not contain details on some elements that should be in a comprehensive strategic plan. For example, the plan provided few details on the discrete actions the government would take to address problems, projected completion dates for the actions, the resources required to accomplish the plan's objectives, or potential risks or mitigation plans to address the risks. Also, while the plan establishes a wide variety of metrics to address timeliness for the investigations phase of the process, it does little to address timeliness in the adjudication phase of the process. Third, although the plan acknowledges that agencies have concerns about the quality of investigations and adjudications, the government plan devotes little attention to monitoring and improving the quality of the personnel security clearance process. Developing specific steps to address the general concerns that I identified in my testimony should move OMB and the executive branch agencies closer to their goal of improving the personnel security clearance process.

If you or other members of the subcommittee have any additional questions about DOD's personnel security program, please contact me at (202) 512-5559 or stewartd@gao.gov. Contact points for our Offices of Congressional Relations and Public Affairs may be found on the last page of this correspondence. GAO staff who made major contributions to the correspondence are listed in the enclosure.

Sincerely yours,



Derek B. Stewart
Director, Defense Capabilities and Management

Enclosure

Enclosure

GAO Contact and Staff Acknowledgments

GAO Contact

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