

Why GAO Did This Study

In light of long-standing problems with delays and backlogs, Congress mandated personnel security clearance reforms through the Intelligence Reform and Terrorism Prevention Act of 2004 (IRTPA). These included requirements related to timeliness, reciprocity, and the creation of a single database to house personnel security clearance information. In 2008, Executive Order 13467 established the Performance Accountability Council. GAO was asked to review the extent to which executive branch agencies (1) investigate and adjudicate personnel security clearance applications in a timely manner, (2) honor previously granted security clearances, and (3) share personnel security clearance information in a single, integrated database. GAO reviewed and analyzed Performance Accountability Council timeliness data for fiscal year 2009 and the first three quarters of fiscal year 2010. GAO also examined key clearance reform documents and conducted interviews with executive branch agencies, including members of the Intelligence Community, to discuss the three stated objectives.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that the Performance Accountability Council collaborate with executive agencies to develop a plan to improve timeliness for those agencies not yet achieving the 60-day timeliness objective and metrics to track reciprocity. In commenting on this draft, the Performance Accountability Council concurred with all recommendations.

View [GAO-11-65](#) or key components. For more information, contact Brenda S. Farrell at (202) 512-3604 or farrellb@gao.gov.

PERSONNEL SECURITY CLEARANCES

Progress Has Been Made to Improve Timeliness but Continued Oversight Is Needed to Sustain Momentum

What GAO Found

Significant overall progress has been made to improve the investigation and adjudication of personnel security clearance applications in a timely manner. This is largely attributable to the Department of Defense (DOD), whose clearances comprise a vast majority of governmentwide initial clearances. IRTPA establishes an objective for all agencies to make a determination on at least 90 percent of all applications for a personnel security clearance within an average of 60 days. The majority of clearances are processed in line with the IRTPA 60-day objective. Certain agencies, however, continue to face challenges for meeting timeliness objectives. Out of the 14 agencies included in GAO's review, DOD, the Department of Energy, and the National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency met the IRTPA 60-day timeliness objective in the first three quarters of fiscal year 2010. Timeliness among the other executive branch agencies ranged from 62 to 154 days. IRTPA and the recent Intelligence Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2010 also require annual reporting on the progress made towards meeting objectives, including a discussion of impediments related to timeliness and quality. While the Performance Accountability Council has taken steps to assist in implementation of reform efforts, it has not reported on the impediments to meeting timeliness objectives for specific agencies not yet achieving this goal.

Executive branch agency officials stated that they often honor previously granted personnel security clearances (i.e., grant reciprocity), but the true extent of reciprocity is unknown because governmentwide metrics do not exist. IRTPA generally requires that all personnel security clearance investigations and determinations be accepted by all agencies, with limited exceptions when necessary for national security purposes. Agency officials stated that they grant reciprocity, but some noted that they have taken steps to obtain additional information before granting reciprocity. For example, officials stated that they may request copies of background investigation reports before they will honor a security clearance because information available in databases contain limited, summary level detail. Agency officials also reported that steps must be taken to conduct suitability determinations to ensure an applicant's character is appropriate for the position. The extent to which reciprocity is occurring is unknown because no metrics exist to consistently and comprehensively track reciprocity.

Although there are no plans to develop a single, integrated database, steps have been taken to upgrade existing systems and increase information sharing. The Performance Accountability Council has opted to leverage existing systems in lieu of the single, integrated database required by IRTPA. Officials assert that a single database is not a viable option due to concerns related to privacy, security, and data ownership. Therefore, a single search capability of existing databases is being used to address the IRTPA requirement. For example, information from two primary databases can now be accessed from a single entry point, allowing executive branch agencies to share clearance information with one another. The Intelligence Community agencies share information through a separate database.