

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-18-314](#), a report to congressional requesters

Why GAO Did This Study

In response to congressional concerns about potential vulnerabilities in the visa issuance process, ICE implemented VSP in 2003, which deploys officials to certain U.S. posts overseas to review visa applications, train consular officers, and conduct related investigations. ICE had expanded VSP operations to 32 posts, as of 2017.

GAO was asked to review VSP. This report examines the extent to which: (1) VSP has contributed to the visa adjudication process, (2) ICE has implemented a system to assess VSP performance, and (3) ICE has identified and evaluated options to expand VSP to additional posts.

GAO analyzed ICE data for each VSP post for fiscal years 2014 through 2016, the most current full-year data available at the time of GAO's study; reviewed documents relating to VSP; and interviewed relevant agency officials. GAO visited 7 VSP posts selected on the basis of workload and other factors, and administered two surveys to consular and VSP officials, respectively, at all VSP posts that were operational at the time the survey was administered.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that ICE ensure that trainings are implemented as required, develop and implement outcome-based performance measures, and incorporate PATRIOT data and remote options into its site selection process. DHS concurred with all recommendations. This is a public version of a sensitive report issued in December 2017. Information that DHS or State deemed sensitive has been omitted.

View [GAO-18-314](#). For more information, contact Rebecca Gambler at (202) 512-8777 or gambler@gao.gov.

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BORDER SECURITY

Actions Needed to Strengthen Performance Management and Planning for Expansion of DHS's Visa Security Program

What GAO Found

The Department of Homeland Security's (DHS) U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) manages the Visa Security Program (VSP), which provides an additional layer of review to the visa adjudication process; however, VSP agents are not consistently providing required training to consular officers. ICE implemented the Pre-Adjudicated Threat Recognition and Intelligence Operations Team (PATRIOT) in fiscal year 2014. PATRIOT screens 100 percent of nonimmigrant visa applications at VSP posts against U.S. databases, and U.S.-based analysts manually vet applications with potential matches to derogatory information. VSP agents at post then make recommendations to Department of State (State) consular officers on whether to refuse a visa. In fiscal year 2016, VSP screened over 2.1 million visa applications, and recommended over 8,000 visa refusals. In addition, VSP agents and VSP-funded locally employed staff dedicated approximately 43 percent of their work hours in fiscal year 2016 to non-VSP activities—such as assisting ICE investigations not directly related to visas. ICE increased the percentage of VSP posts providing quarterly training from 30 percent in fiscal year 2014 to 79 percent in fiscal year 2016. However, some trainings are not targeted to the specific post and do not address identified threats to the visa process, as required. Ensuring that VSP agents provide required training would help ensure consular officers have information that could assist them in adjudicating visas.

ICE developed objectives and performance measures for VSP, but its measures are not outcome-based and limit the agency's ability to assess the effectiveness of VSP. As of fiscal year 2017, none of VSP's 19 established performance measures are outcome-based. For example, ICE measures its activities, such as number of visa refusals VSP agents recommended, rather than the outcomes of those recommendations. ICE officials stated that measuring VSP's outcomes is difficult due to the qualitative nature of the program's benefits; however, solely tracking activities, such as number of recommended refusals, does not allow ICE to evaluate VSP's effectiveness. Developing and implementing outcome-based performance measures, consistent with best practices for performance management, would help ICE determine whether VSP is achieving its objectives.

ICE evaluated options for VSP expansion but its site selection process did not incorporate PATRIOT data or options for remote operations that, for example, use U.S.-based VSP agents. ICE has previously utilized PATRIOT to gather data to estimate program capacity, but ICE officials stated that they do not use PATRIOT to collect data on the potential number of ineligible visa applicants and workload for posts under consideration for VSP expansion. By incorporating PATRIOT data on posts under consideration into its site selection process, ICE could more effectively manage human capital and other resources. Further, ICE has implemented remote VSP operations in some posts, but does not consider such approaches during its annual site selection process. ICE documentation stated that ICE could successfully screen and vet applicants remotely through VSP, however the officials' preferred approach is to deploy agents to posts overseas. Incorporating remote options for VSP operations could help identify opportunities to further expand VSP and better utilize resources.