



Highlights of [GAO-09-684T](#), a testimony to the Subcommittee on Oversight of Government Management, the Federal Workforce, and the District of Columbia, Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs, U.S. Senate

## Why GAO Did This Study

Due to concerns about long standing delays in the security clearance process, Congress mandated reforms in the Intelligence Reform and Terrorism Prevention Act of 2004 (IRTPA), which requires, among other things, that the executive branch report annually to Congress. Since 2005, the Department of Defense's (DOD) clearance program has been on GAO's high-risk list due to delays and incomplete documentation. The Office of Personnel Management (OPM) conducts much of the government's clearance investigations. In 2007, the Director of National Intelligence and DOD established a Joint Reform Team to coordinate governmentwide improvement efforts for the process. The Office of Management and Budget (OMB) oversees these efforts.

Based on two recent GAO reports, this statement addresses (1) progress in reducing delays at DOD, (2) opportunities for improving executive branch reports to Congress and (3) the extent to which joint reform efforts reflect key factors for reform. GAO independently analyzed DOD clearances granted in fiscal year 2008, assessed the executive branch's 2006-2009 reports to Congress, and compared three joint reform reports to key transformation practices. GAO previously recommended that OMB improve the transparency in executive branch reporting and establish a strategic framework. OMB concurred or partially concurred with these recommendations.

View [GAO-09-684T](#) or [key components](#). For more information, contact Brenda S. Farrell at (202) 512-3604 or [farrellb@gao.gov](mailto:farrellb@gao.gov).

## PERSONNEL SECURITY CLEARANCES

### Progress Has Been Made to Reduce Delays but Further Actions Are Needed to Enhance Quality and Sustain Reform Efforts

#### What GAO Found

DOD and OPM have made significant progress in reducing delays in making security clearance decisions and met statutory timeliness requirements for DOD's initial clearances completed in fiscal year 2008. IRTPA currently requires that decisions on at least 80 percent of initial clearances be made within an average of 120 days. In 2008, GAO found that OPM and DOD made initial decisions on these clearances within 87 days, on average.

Opportunities exist for the executive branch to improve its annual reports to Congress. For example, the executive branch's 2009 report to Congress did not reflect the full range of time it took to make all initial clearance decisions and has provided little information on quality. Under the current IRTPA requirements, the executive branch can exclude the slowest 20 percent of clearances and then calculate timeliness based on an average of the remaining clearances. GAO analyzed 100 percent of initial clearances granted in 2008 without taking averages or excluding the slowest clearances and found that 39 percent took more than 120 days. The absence of comprehensive reporting limits full visibility over the timeliness of initial clearance decisions. With respect to quality, although IRTPA grants the executive branch latitude in reporting, the 2006-2009 reports provided little information on quality. However, the 2009 report identified quality measures that the executive branch proposes to collect. GAO has stated that timeliness alone does not provide a complete picture of the clearance process. For example, GAO recently estimated that with respect to initial top secret clearances adjudicated in July 2008, documentation was incomplete for most OPM investigative reports. Greater attention to quality could increase instances of reciprocity—an entity's acceptance of another entity's clearances.

Initial joint reform efforts reflect key practices for organizational transformation that GAO has identified, such as having committed leadership and a dedicated implementation team, but the Joint Reform Team's reports do not provide a strategic framework that contains important elements of successful transformation, including long-term goals with outcome-focused performance measures, nor do they identify potential obstacles to progress and possible remedies. Further, GAO's prior work and IRTPA identified several factors key to reforming the clearance process. These include (1) engaging in governmentwide reciprocity, (2) consolidating information technology, and (3) identifying and reporting long-term funding requirements. However, the Joint Reform Team's information technology strategy does not yet define roles and responsibilities for implementing a new automated capability which is intended to be a cross-agency collaborative initiative. Also, the joint reform reports do not contain information on funding requirements or identify funding sources. The reform effort's success will depend upon the extent to which the Joint Reform Team is able to fully address these key factors moving forward. Further, it is imperative that OMB's Deputy Director for Management continue in the crucial role as chair of the Performance Accountability Council, which oversees joint reform team efforts.