HOMELAND SECURITY

Prospects for US-VISIT Biometric Exit Capability Remain Unclear

What GAO Found

After investing about $1.3 billion over 4 years, DHS has delivered essentially one-half of US-VISIT, meaning that biometrically enabled entry capabilities are operating at almost 300 air, sea, and land ports of entry (POEs). The program uses biometric identifiers (digital finger scans and photographs) to screen people against watch lists and to verify that a visitor is the person who was issued a visa or other travel document.

The prospects for successfully delivering an operational exit solution are as uncertain today as they were 4 years ago. The department’s latest available documentation indicates that little has changed in how DHS is approaching its definition and justification of future US-VISIT exit efforts. Specifically, DHS has indicated that it intends to spend $27.3 million ($7.3 million in fiscal year 2007 funding and $20 million in fiscal year 2006 carryover funding) on air and sea exit capabilities. However, it has not produced either plans or analyses that adequately define and justify how it intends to invest these funds. Rather, it has only described in general terms near-term deployment plans for biometric exit capabilities at air and sea POEs, and acknowledged that a near-term biometric solution for land POEs is not possible. Beyond this high-level schedule, no other exit program plans are available that define what will be done by what entities and at what cost.

In the absence of more detailed plans and justification governing its exit intentions, it is unlikely that the department’s latest efforts to deliver near-term air and sea exit capabilities will produce results different from the past. Therefore, the prospects for having operational exit capabilities continue to be unclear. Moreover, the longer the department goes without exit capabilities, the more its ability to effectively and efficiently perform its border security and immigration enforcement missions will suffer. Among other things, this means that DHS cannot ensure the integrity of the immigration system by identifying and removing those people who have overstayed their original period of admission, which is a stated goal of US-VISIT. Further, DHS immigration and customs enforcement entities will continue to spend limited resources on investigating potential visa violators who have already left the country.

What GAO Recommends

In light of the department’s longstanding challenges in delivering an operational exit capability and the uncertainty surrounding its future exit efforts, GAO urges the department to approach its latest attempt at deploying mission critical exit capabilities with the kind of rigor and discipline that GAO has previously recommended.

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