SECURITY CLEARANCES

FBI has Enhanced its Process for State and Local Law Enforcement Officials

What GAO Found

Federal government-wide policies, as implemented by the FBI, apply to state and local officials seeking FBI-issued security clearances. The security clearance process for state and local officials involves six broad steps that consist of, among other things, an extensive background investigation and an adjudication based on federal government-wide criteria.

Since September 11, 2001, the FBI processed about 92 percent of top secret security clearance applications within its time frame goals of 6 to 9 months. About 26 percent of secret security clearance applications were processed within the FBI’s time frame goals of 45 to 60 days, although substantial improvements have been made in the most recent quarters for which GAO has data. Time frames for completion of both top secret and secret applications have decreased since 2001. For either top secret or secret security clearance applications, processing time frames can vary depending on various factors, including the complexity of individual cases.

The FBI has enhanced its security clearance and information-sharing processes with state and local law enforcement agencies and officials. The FBI sent guidance on the security clearance process to its field staff and added staff to its headquarters unit responsible for processing state and local security clearance applications. To increase information sharing with state and local law enforcement officials, the FBI increased its number of Joint Terrorism Task Forces, which allow state and local law enforcement officials to engage in counterterrorism efforts directly with FBI officials, and has used a variety of bulletins, briefings, and database networks.

Officials from the Department of Justice and the FBI reviewed a draft of this report and generally concurred with GAO’s findings.