HOMELAND SECURITY

Strategic Solution for US-VISIT Program Needs to Be Better Defined, Justified, and Coordinated

What GAO Found

DHS has partially defined a strategic solution for meeting US-VISIT’s goals. In particular, the US-VISIT program office has defined and begun to develop a key capability known as “Unique Identity,” which is to establish a single identity for all individuals who interact with any immigration and border management organization by capturing the individual’s biometrics, including 10 fingerprints and a digital image, at the earliest possible interaction. However, the program office has yet to define and economically justify a comprehensive strategic solution for controlling and monitoring the exit of foreign visitors, which is critical to accomplishing the program’s goals. Further, the department did not economically justify its ongoing investment in Unique Identity in a timely fashion. Specifically, the program office did not justify its investment until about 14 months after selecting and pursuing an alternative solution and obligating about $65 million. The absence of a fully defined strategic solution and timely economic justification hinders informed decision making about the best course of action for accomplishing strategic program goals and inhibits the ability to measure performance and promote accountability.

DHS considered various biometric technologies, including fingerprints, facial, and iris technologies, and continues to use fingerprints as its foundational biometric technology. The focus on fingerprint technology is appropriate, given the opportunity to leverage existing DHS and Federal Bureau of Investigation identification systems and databases and to establish a single identity mechanism for all immigration and border management programs. In addition, research into fingerprints and other forms of biometric identification, such as facial recognition and iris scanning, show that fingerprints continue to be the most accurate biometric for identification purposes.

DHS is taking a range of evolving actions, primarily at the department level, to coordinate relationships among US-VISIT and other immigration and border management programs. Thus far, this evolution has yet to progress to the point of reflecting the full scope of key practices that GAO has previously identified as essential to enhancing and sustaining collaborative efforts that span multiple organizations. To its credit, the department has defined common outcomes through its strategic plan and enterprise architecture and has taken steps to implement other collaboration practices, such as leveraging resources across its screening programs and developing screening performance indicators. However, the US-VISIT program office has yet to fully define its relationships with other immigration and border management programs. As a result, the department is at increased risk of introducing the inefficiencies and reduced effectiveness that result from suboptimizing how these programs collectively support its immigration and border management goals and objectives.