

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-18-156T](#), a testimony before the Subcommittee on Immigration and Border Security, Committee on the Judiciary, House of Representatives

Why GAO Did This Study

According to UNHCR, as of June 2017, more than 21 million people were refugees worldwide. State manages the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program (USRAP) and coordinates with UNHCR, which refers the most applicants to USRAP, and USCIS, which adjudicates refugee applications. Deterring and detecting fraud is essential to ensuring the integrity of USRAP and an increase in the number of applicants approved for resettlement in the United States from countries where terrorists operate has raised questions about the adequacy of applicant screening.

This statement addresses (1) how State works with UNHCR to ensure program integrity in the UNHCR resettlement referral process; (2) the extent to which State and RSCs have policies and procedures on refugee case processing and State has overseen RSC activities; (3) the extent to which USCIS has policies and procedures for adjudicating refugee applications; and (4) the extent to which State, USCIS, and their partners follow leading practices to reduce the risk of staff and applicant fraud in USRAP. This statement is based on GAO's July 2017 reports regarding USRAP. To conduct that work, GAO analyzed State, USCIS, and UNHCR policies; interviewed relevant officials; conducted fieldwork in 2016 at selected UNHCR offices, as well as at RSCs in Austria, Jordan, Kenya, and El Salvador, where GAO observed a nongeneralizable sample of refugee screening interviews (selected based on application data and other factors).

What GAO Recommends

GAO made recommendations to State and USCIS to strengthen the implementation of USRAP. State and USCIS agreed with GAO's recommendations and have begun taking actions to address them.

View [GAO-18-156T](#). For more information, contact Rebecca Gambler at (202) 512-8777 or gablerr@gao.gov or Thomas Melito at (202) 512-9601 or melitot@gao.gov.

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REFUGEES

Federal Agencies and Their Partners Have Implemented Certain Measures, but Need to Further Strengthen Applicant Screening and Assess Fraud Risks

What GAO Found

The Department of State (State) and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) have worked together on measures designed to ensure integrity in the refugee resettlement referral process and have established a framework to guide their partnership. Working with State, UNHCR has implemented standard operating procedures and other guidance that, according to UNHCR officials, provides baseline requirements throughout the referral process. UNHCR also uses databases to help verify the identities of, and manage information about, refugees.

State and the nine worldwide Resettlement Support Centers (RSC) have policies and procedures for processing refugee applications. Overseen by State, the organizations that operate RSCs hire staff to process and prescreen applicants who have been referred for resettlement consideration. GAO observed 27 prescreening interviews conducted by RSC caseworkers in four countries and found that, for example, RSCs generally recorded key information and submitted any required security checks. However, State has not established outcome-based performance indicators to evaluate whether RSCs were consistently and effectively prescreening applicants and preparing case files—key RSC activities that have important implications for timely and effective adjudication and security checks. Developing outcome-based performance indicators would better position State to determine whether RSCs are meeting their responsibilities.

The Department of Homeland Security's U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) has policies and procedures for adjudicating refugee applications for resettlement in the United States, including how officers are to conduct interviews and adjudicate applications. GAO observed 29 USCIS interviews and found that officers completed all parts of the required assessment. USCIS also provides guidance to help officers identify national security concerns in applications, which can be challenging to identify as country conditions evolve. In 2016, USCIS determined that its pilot to send officers with national security expertise overseas to support interviewing officers was successful. USCIS has taken steps to fill these positions, but it has not yet developed a plan for deploying these additional officers, whose expertise could help improve the effectiveness of the adjudication process.

State, USCIS, and their partners have implemented antifraud measures to reduce the risk of staff and applicant fraud—both of which have occurred—but could further assess fraud risks. Officials from all nine RSCs stated that they assign staff fraud risk management responsibilities to designated individuals. However, not all RSCs reported complying with all required program integrity measures—reported compliance at individual RSCs ranged from 86 to 100 percent. State has also not required RSCs to conduct regular staff fraud risk assessments tailored to each RSC or examined the suitability of related controls. Without taking additional steps to address these issues, State and RSCs may face challenges in identifying new staff fraud risks or gaps in the program's internal control system and implementing new control activities to mitigate them. Further, State and USCIS have not jointly assessed applicant fraud risk program-wide. Doing so could help them ensure that fraud detection and prevention efforts across USRAP are targeted to those areas that are of highest risk.