



March 2018

BORDER SECURITY

Actions Needed to Strengthen Performance Management and Planning for Expansion of DHS's Visa Security Program

Accessible Version

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-18-314](#), a report to congressional requesters

Why GAO Did This Study

In response to congressional concerns about potential vulnerabilities in the visa issuance process, ICE implemented VSP in 2003, which deploys officials to certain U.S. posts overseas to review visa applications, train consular officers, and conduct related investigations. ICE had expanded VSP operations to 32 posts, as of 2017.

GAO was asked to review VSP. This report examines the extent to which: (1) VSP has contributed to the visa adjudication process, (2) ICE has implemented a system to assess VSP performance, and (3) ICE has identified and evaluated options to expand VSP to additional posts.

GAO analyzed ICE data for each VSP post for fiscal years 2014 through 2016, the most current full-year data available at the time of GAO's study; reviewed documents relating to VSP; and interviewed relevant agency officials. GAO visited 7 VSP posts selected on the basis of workload and other factors, and administered two surveys to consular and VSP officials, respectively, at all VSP posts that were operational at the time the survey was administered.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that ICE ensure that trainings are implemented as required, develop and implement outcome-based performance measures, and incorporate PATRIOT data and remote options into its site selection process. DHS concurred with all recommendations. This is a public version of a sensitive report issued in December 2017. Information that DHS or State deemed sensitive has been omitted.

View [GAO-18-314](#). For more information, contact Rebecca Gambler at (202) 512-8777 or gablerr@gao.gov.

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Actions Needed to Strengthen Performance Management and Planning for Expansion of DHS's Visa Security Program

What GAO Found

The Department of Homeland Security's (DHS) U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) manages the Visa Security Program (VSP), which provides an additional layer of review to the visa adjudication process; however, VSP agents are not consistently providing required training to consular officers. ICE implemented the Pre-Adjudicated Threat Recognition and Intelligence Operations Team (PATRIOT) in fiscal year 2014. PATRIOT screens 100 percent of nonimmigrant visa applications at VSP posts against U.S. databases, and U.S.-based analysts manually vet applications with potential matches to derogatory information. VSP agents at post then make recommendations to Department of State (State) consular officers on whether to refuse a visa. In fiscal year 2016, VSP screened over 2.1 million visa applications, and recommended over 8,000 visa refusals. In addition, VSP agents and VSP-funded locally employed staff dedicated approximately 43 percent of their work hours in fiscal year 2016 to non-VSP activities—such as assisting ICE investigations not directly related to visas. ICE increased the percentage of VSP posts providing quarterly training from 30 percent in fiscal year 2014 to 79 percent in fiscal year 2016. However, some trainings are not targeted to the specific post and do not address identified threats to the visa process, as required. Ensuring that VSP agents provide required training would help ensure consular officers have information that could assist them in adjudicating visas.

ICE developed objectives and performance measures for VSP, but its measures are not outcome-based and limit the agency's ability to assess the effectiveness of VSP. As of fiscal year 2017, none of VSP's 19 established performance measures are outcome-based. For example, ICE measures its activities, such as number of visa refusals VSP agents recommended, rather than the outcomes of those recommendations. ICE officials stated that measuring VSP's outcomes is difficult due to the qualitative nature of the program's benefits; however, solely tracking activities, such as number of recommended refusals, does not allow ICE to evaluate VSP's effectiveness. Developing and implementing outcome-based performance measures, consistent with best practices for performance management, would help ICE determine whether VSP is achieving its objectives.

ICE evaluated options for VSP expansion but its site selection process did not incorporate PATRIOT data or options for remote operations that, for example, use U.S.-based VSP agents. ICE has previously utilized PATRIOT to gather data to estimate program capacity, but ICE officials stated that they do not use PATRIOT to collect data on the potential number of ineligible visa applicants and workload for posts under consideration for VSP expansion. By incorporating PATRIOT data on posts under consideration into its site selection process, ICE could more effectively manage human capital and other resources. Further, ICE has implemented remote VSP operations in some posts, but does not consider such approaches during its annual site selection process. ICE documentation stated that ICE could successfully screen and vet applicants remotely through VSP, however the officials' preferred approach is to deploy agents to posts overseas. Incorporating remote options for VSP operations could help identify opportunities to further expand VSP and better utilize resources.

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Abbreviations

ARSO-I	Assistant Regional Security Officer Investigator
CBP	U.S. Customs and Border Protection
DHS	Department of Homeland Security
FBI	Federal Bureau of Investigation
GPRA	Government Performance and Results Act of 1993
GPRAMA	GPRA Modernization Act of 2010
HSI	Homeland Security Investigations
ICE	U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement
INA	Immigration and Nationality Act
MOU	memorandum of understanding
OIG	Office of Inspector General
OMB	Office of Management and Budget
PATRIOT	Pre-Adjudicated Threat Recognition and Intelligence Operations Team
State	Department of State
TIDE	Terrorist Identities Datamart Environment
TSDB	Terrorist Screening Database
VSP	Visa Security Program

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March 20, 2018

Congressional Requesters

In response to congressional questions about potential vulnerabilities in the visa issuance process, U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), a component within the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), implemented the Visa Security Program (VSP) in 2003.¹ ICE has since deployed officials to certain U.S. embassies and consulates overseas to strengthen the visa review process by working with Department of State (State) consular officers in reviewing applications.² In fiscal year 2014, ICE, in collaboration with U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP), implemented the Pre-Adjudicated Threat Recognition and Intelligence Operations Team (PATRIOT), which significantly changed VSP operations by automating parts of this review process at VSP posts, among other changes.³ Since 2003, ICE has gradually expanded VSP operations to additional locations overseas, from 3 posts in 2003 to 32 posts in 2017, and Congress has directed DHS to further expand the program. Specifically, the explanatory statement accompanying the Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2017, directed ICE to continue planning

¹The Homeland Security Act of 2002 established DHS and gave the Secretary of Homeland Security authority to issue regulations with respect to the issuance and refusal of visas, and to assign DHS employees to consular posts overseas to support the visa process. Pub. L. No. 107-296, tit. I, IV, §§ 101, 428, 116 Stat. 2135, 2142, 2187-88 (classified at 6 U.S.C. §§ 111, 236).

²Unless otherwise noted, this report generally focuses on nonimmigrant visas, which are those issued to foreign nationals seeking temporary admission into the United States under a specific nonimmigrant category (8 U.S.C. § 1101(a)(15); 8 C.F.R. § 214.1(a)(1)-(2)), for an authorized period of stay delineated by a particular timeframe or duration-of-status (i.e., admission for duration of a specific program or activity, which may be variable). Nonimmigrant visa holders include tourists, business visitors, or students, among others. Immigrant visas are issued to eligible "immigrants" (foreign nationals who do not fall within one of the classes of nonimmigrants) seeking lawful permanent resident status in the United States with a path to citizenship. See 8 U.S.C. § 1101(a)(16). Certain nonimmigrants—for example, recipients of K visas for the fiancé(e) or spouse of a U.S. citizen or their children, and T and U visas for victims of severe forms of trafficking in persons or other qualifying crimes—are also eligible for lawful permanent residence, provided they satisfy the applicable statutory criteria.

³For the purposes of this report, posts refer to U.S. embassies, consulates, and other types of diplomatic and consular posts, such as multilateral missions or American presence posts. We use the term VSP post to refer to posts for which VSP conducts visa screening, vetting, training, and consular-related investigative activities.

and budgeting for VSP expansion to at least two high-threat locations per year in future budget requests.⁴

We have previously reported on VSP.⁵ In 2011, we found that ICE could not accurately assess progress toward meeting program objectives because it did not collect comprehensive data on VSP activities, and some of the data it collected were not reliable.⁶ We also reported that VSP agents were not consistently providing required advice and training to consular officers across all posts, and at some posts, consular officers received no training. Further, we reported that ICE did not track information on its non-VSP activities—that is, investigative and administrative functions beyond visa security responsibilities—and it was unable to identify the time VSP agents spent on these activities. We made several recommendations to help address these weaknesses. DHS concurred with and took actions to address our recommendation regarding training for consular officers; however, DHS did not concur with our recommendation that ICE collect comprehensive data on all performance measures and track the time VSP agents spent on visa security versus other activities.

⁴See Explanatory Statement (163 Cong. Rec. H3327, H3811 (daily ed. May 3, 2017)) accompanying the DHS Appropriations Act, 2017, Pub. L. No. 115-31, div. F, 131 Stat. 135. See also Explanatory Statement (161 Cong. Rec. H10161, H10168 (daily ed. Dec. 17, 2015)) accompanying DHS Appropriations Act, 2016, Pub. L. No. 114-113, div. F, 129 Stat. 2242 (2015).

⁵See GAO, *Border Security: DHS's Visa Security Program Needs to Improve Performance Evaluation and Better Address Visa Risk Worldwide*, [GAO-11-315](#) (Washington, D.C.: Mar. 31, 2011), and *Border Security: Actions Needed to Strengthen Management of Department of Homeland Security's Visa Security Program*, [GAO-05-801](#) (Washington, D.C.: Jul. 29, 2005).

⁶In 2014, DHS's Office of Inspector General also concluded that ICE could not assess VSP's performance, in part because of data limitations, and recommended that ICE develop performance measures to determine the success of VSP in meeting its objectives. In response, ICE officials updated VSP's performance measures by removing measures for investigations and training and adding new measures for data that could readily be collected via PATRIOT, which had not been implemented at the time of the DHS Office of the Inspector General's review. See DHS' Office of Inspector General, *The DHS Visa Security Program*, [OIG-14-137](#) (Washington, D.C.: Sept. 10, 2014).

In light of continued questions about the security of the visa process, you asked us to review ICE's management of VSP.⁷ This report examines the extent to which: (1) VSP has contributed to the visa adjudication process, (2) ICE has developed and implemented a system to assess VSP performance, and (3) ICE has identified and evaluated options to expand VSP to additional posts.

This report is a public version of a sensitive report that we issued in December 2017.⁸ DHS and State deemed some of the information in that report to be Sensitive But Unclassified or Law Enforcement Sensitive, which must be protected from public disclosure. Therefore, this report omits sensitive information about the visa screening and vetting process, as well as the specific locations of VSP posts. Although the information provided in this report is more limited, the report addresses the same objectives as the sensitive report and uses the same methodology.

To determine the extent to which VSP has contributed to the visa adjudication process, we analyzed ICE data for each VSP post for fiscal years 2014—the year PATRIOT was implemented—through 2016—the most recently available full year data on the results of VSP operations. To assess the reliability of these data, we interviewed ICE officials who use and maintain the data and checked the data for missing information, outliers, and obvious errors, among other actions. On the basis of these steps, we determined that the data were sufficiently reliable for the purposes of our reporting objectives, including providing summary statistics on VSP operations. We also reviewed program documentation, memoranda of understanding (MOU), standard operating procedures, and relevant legislation, such as the Homeland Security Act of 2002 and Immigration and Nationality Act (INA), and we interviewed ICE and State headquarters officials on VSP operations. We conducted site visits to seven VSP posts to observe VSP operations, and interviewed ICE and

⁷This report does not address individuals who are allowed to seek admission to the United States without a visa, such as citizens of Canada and the British Overseas Territory of Bermuda (and certain residents of other adjacent islands, such as the Bahamas) under certain circumstances, as well as Visa Waiver Program participants. The Visa Waiver Program allows nationals from certain countries to apply for admission to the United States as temporary visitors for business or pleasure without first obtaining a visa from a U.S. embassy or consulate abroad. See 8 U.S.C. § 1187; 8 C.F.R. §§ 212.1, 214.6(d), 217.1-217.7; 22 C.F.R. §§ 41.0-41.3.

⁸GAO, *Border Security: Actions Needed to Strengthen Performance Management and Planning for Expansion of DHS's Visa Security Program*, [GAO-18-104SU](#) (Washington, D.C.: Dec. 19, 2017).

Key Visa Adjudication Process Term

Derogatory information: Information on a visa applicant that makes him or her potentially inadmissible to the United States or otherwise ineligible for a visa.

Source: GAO. | GAO-18-314

State consular officials on VSP in each location.⁹ We selected these posts out of the 29 VSP posts that were operational as of January 2017 on the basis of their relatively high visa workloads; ICE data on the percentage of applicants that potentially matched to derogatory information in fiscal year 2016; and, geographic distribution to help account for variations in visa applicant pools that VSP agents encounter at different locations. Our observations from these site visits are illustrative and provide insights about VSP operations, but are not generalizable to all VSP posts. We also administered two separate surveys—one to consular managers who oversee the consular officers who adjudicate visas, and another to VSP agents—at all 29 VSP posts to gather information and insights on VSP and PATRIOT, among other things. We administered these instruments from March through May 2017 in person at the 7 posts we visited, and by email to the remaining 22. We received responses from all 29 posts.

To determine the extent to which ICE has developed and implemented a system to assess VSP performance, we gathered information on VSP performance measurement practices and reviewed annual reports to Congress.¹⁰ We also reviewed our prior work and DHS Office of Inspector General (OIG) reports on VSP's performance management.¹¹ We analyzed relevant information in light of principles outlined in the Government Performance and Results Act (GPRA) Modernization Act of 2010 and best practices for performance management.¹² We also gathered documentation from State to better understand other potential data on the outcomes of visa applications that were reviewed by VSP agents (see appendix I for more information about these data and our analysis).

To determine the extent to which ICE has identified and evaluated options to expand VSP to additional posts, we obtained information from ICE on

⁹Specific VSP locations we visited are omitted from this report because DHS deemed VSP locations to be sensitive.

¹⁰6 U.S.C. § 236(e)(4).

¹¹For example, see [GAO-11-315](#) and [OIG-14-137](#).

¹²GPRA Modernization Act of 2010 (GPRAMA), Pub. L. No. 111-352, 124 Stat. 3866 (2011) (updating GPRA of 1993, Pub. L. No. 103-62, 107 Stat. 285). In particular, see GPRAMA § 3, 124 Stat. at 3867-71 (codified at 31 U.S.C. § 1115) (relating to agency performance plans and performance measurement). For best practices for performance management, see GAO, *Designing Evaluations: 2012 Revision*, [GAO-12-208G](#) (Washington, D.C.: Jan. 2012); *Performance Measurement Definitions and Relationships*, [GAO-11-646SP](#) (Washington, D.C.: May 2, 2011).

VSP's expansion to new posts since 2003, such as start dates and staffing levels. We also reviewed information on the extent to which ICE has assessed the potential to expand VSP using remote operations—that is, by using U.S.- or other non-on site VSP agents to review visa applications and conduct other VSP-related activities. For example, we reviewed ICE's evaluation of its 2016 pilot on remote VSP operations, interviewed ICE and State officials who participated in the pilot, and analyzed performance data from the pilot posts. We reviewed ICE's methodology for site selection, which it updated in 2017 for future years' site selection, including lists of posts that were prioritized for future expansion. We also reviewed prior methodologies that ICE used to expand the program from 2003 through fiscal year 2017. We assessed these methodologies against internal control standards, best practices for making resource allocation decisions and estimating cost, and Office of Management and Budget (OMB) guidance for making program expansion decisions.¹³ Additional information about our scope and methodology for all three objectives is included in appendix I.

We conducted this performance audit from November 2016 through December 2017 in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards. Those standards require that we plan and perform the audit to obtain sufficient, appropriate evidence to provide a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives. We believe that the evidence obtained provides a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives. We subsequently worked with DHS and State from December 2017 to March 2018 to prepare this nonsensitive version of the original sensitive report for public release. This public version was also prepared in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards.

¹³GAO, *Standards for Internal Control in the Federal Government*, [GAO-14-704G](#) (Washington, D.C.: September 2014); GAO *Cost Estimating and Assessment Guide: Best Practices for Developing and Managing Capital Program Costs*, [GAO-09-3SP](#) (Washington, D.C.: March 2009). Also see OMB, OMB Circular No. A-94, *Guidelines and Discount Rates for Benefit-Cost Analysis of Federal Programs* (Washington, D.C.: Oct. 29, 1992). OMB Circular A-94 provides guidance for any analysis used to support government decisions to initiate, renew, or expand programs or projects that would result in measurable benefits or costs extending for three or more years into the future.

Background

Authorities Governing VSP

Various statutes, memoranda of understanding (MOU), and other guidance documents have established roles and responsibilities for VSP.

Homeland Security Act of 2002 and 2003 MOU. Since its establishment, DHS has had exclusive authority, pursuant to section 428 of the Homeland Security Act, to issue regulations with respect to, administer, and enforce provisions of U.S. immigration and nationality laws relating to the functions of consular officers in connection with the granting or refusal of visas; and DHS is authorized to assign officers to each diplomatic and consular post at which visas are issued.¹⁴ In 2003, DHS and State signed a MOU to govern the implementation of section 428 and, in accordance with the statute, the memorandum broadly outlines DHS officers' responsibilities in reviewing visa applications, indicating that they will:

- provide expert advice to consular officers regarding specific security threats relating to visa adjudication, specifically by gathering and reviewing intelligence relevant to visa adjudication and providing training to consular officers on terrorist threats and detecting applicant fraud;
- review applications on their own initiative or at the request of consular officers; and
- conduct investigations on consular matters under the jurisdiction of the Secretary of Homeland Security.

Further, the MOU notes that DHS has final responsibility over visa guidance, except for those matters that are specifically within the Secretary of State's responsibility in existing statutes related to the

¹⁴Pub. L. No. 107-296, tit. IV, subtit. C, § 428(b), (e), 116 Stat. at 2187-89 (classified at 6 U.S.C. § 236(b), (e)). At post, DHS officers are to review visa applications, conduct related investigations, and provide expert advice and training to State consular officers who adjudicate such applications. Id. at § 428(e), 116 Stat. at 2189.

management of the visa process and foreign policy, and in future statutes, presidential proclamations and executive orders.

2011 MOU. On January 11, 2011, ICE and State's Bureau of Consular Affairs signed an additional MOU to further explain the roles, responsibilities, and collaboration of VSP agents and State officials in daily operations of VSP at posts overseas.¹⁵ The MOU does the following, among other things:

- describes general collaboration between ICE and State for VSP operations as well as for visa and passport fraud investigations;
- establishes roles and responsibilities of VSP agents and consular officers; and
- calls for the development of formal, targeted training and briefings to inform consular officers and other U.S. government personnel at consular posts of identified threats relating to the visa process.

The 2011 MOU also states that the primary responsibility of VSP agents is visa security. However, the MOU acknowledges that ICE personnel perform functions of regional or worldwide scope related to the post where they are assigned, and that VSP agents may be called upon to perform other functions in support of the post.

VSP Management and Funding

VSP is managed by ICE's Homeland Security Investigations (HSI), which is responsible for investigating a wide range of domestic and international activities arising from the illegal movement of people and goods into, within, and out of the United States. Within HSI, management of VSP is divided between International Operations and the National Security Investigations Division. International Operations manages ICE's attaché offices in U.S. embassies and consulates, including offices with VSP agents. According to ICE, these offices coordinate domestic ICE operations with foreign counterparts, investigate and disrupt criminal efforts to smuggle people and materials into the United States, and build international partnerships through outreach and training. Generally, ICE has deployed one or two VSP agents to each VSP post, and some offices

¹⁵According to ICE officials, as of March 2018, ICE and State are in the process of updating this MOU.

also employ locally hired staff who help with VSP operations.¹⁶ ICE's National Security Investigations Division administers VSP's PATRIOT, which aims to identify national security, public safety, and other eligibility concerns related to visa applicants prior to their in-person consular interview at VSP posts. PATRIOT was implemented in September 2014 in partnership with CBP's National Targeting Center, which manages the computer systems off which PATRIOT is based, among other responsibilities.¹⁷

From fiscal years 2009 through 2017, ICE received more than \$300 million in appropriated funds for VSP, as shown in figure 1. Since fiscal year 2010, ICE has generally received between \$30 and \$35 million annually for the program, except for fiscal years 2015 and 2017. Specifically, in both fiscal years 2015 and 2017, ICE received approximately \$50 million to implement VSP.¹⁸ According to the explanatory statements accompanying the appropriations acts for these fiscal years, funding was provided above the requested amounts in order

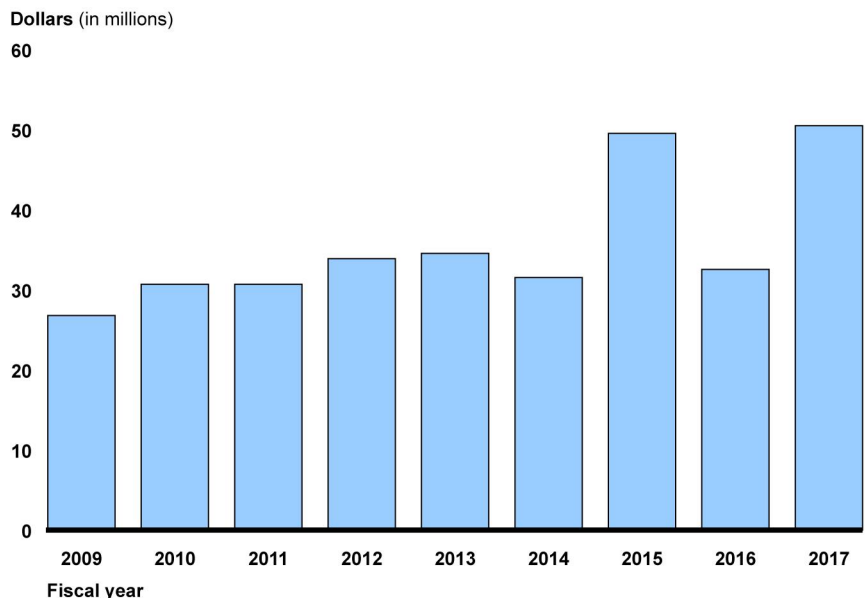
¹⁶As of January 2017, most VSP posts (25 of 29) had one or two VSP agents, according to ICE staffing data. Further, in addition to the agents, most VSP posts (18 of 29) have local staff who help review visa applications and interview applicants to support VSP screening and vetting, among other activities.

¹⁷The National Targeting Center is a 24/7 operations entity responsible for providing advance information and research about high-risk travelers and cargo and facilitating coordination between law enforcement and intelligence agencies in support of CBP's anti-terrorism mission and efforts to keep high-risk individuals and cargo from boarding U.S.-bound flights and vessels. PATRIOT uses CBP's Automated Targeting System, which is a computer-based enforcement and support system that compares traveler information against intelligence and law enforcement data to identify high-risk travelers. We discuss this system in more detail later in this report.

¹⁸See 163 Cong. Rec. at H3811, accompanying Pub. L. No. 115-31, div. F, 131 Stat. 135 (2017) ("\$18,000,000 is provided above the request for VSP to annualize the costs of previously funded program expansion and for further expansion to additional high priority locations."); see also Explanatory Statement (161 Cong. Rec. H227, H280 (daily ed. Jan. 13, 2015)), accompanying the DHS Appropriations Act, 2015, Pub. L. No. 114-4, 129 Stat. 39 ("\$12,000,000 is provided to expand the Visa Security Program to high-threat countries; and an increase of \$3,500,000 is provided to support enhancement to the PATRIOT information technology system for visa vetting.").

to annualize costs of previously funded program expansion and to further expand VSP to high-threat countries, among other reasons.¹⁹

Figure 1: Annual Appropriations for U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement’s Visa Security Program (VSP), Fiscal Years 2009 through 2017



Source: GAO analysis of federal appropriations law and VSP budget documents. | GAO-18-314

Note: Figure 1 shows amounts made available for VSP each fiscal year pursuant to that year’s Department of Homeland Security appropriations act or other statute appropriating funds and does not reflect any reprogrammings, transfers, rescissions, or other adjustments that may have altered total funding available to the program in a particular fiscal year.

¹⁹See 163 Cong. Rec. at H3811; see also 161 Cong. Rec. at H280. For other examples where ICE has received funding above the administration’s request for VSP-related purposes, see, e.g., Explanatory Statement (161 Cong. Rec. at H10168), accompanying the DHS Appropriations Act, 2016, Pub. L. No. 114-113, div. F, 129 Stat. 2242 (2015) (providing \$2,000,000 above the request for VSP to annualize the costs of previously funded program expansion); Conference Report, H.R. Rep. No. 112-331, at 964 (Dec. 15, 2011), accompanying the Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2012, Pub. L. No. 112-74, 125 Stat. 786 (2011) (providing \$4,400,000 above the request to support VSP expansion); and Explanatory Statement (159 Cong. Rec. S1275, S1551 (daily ed. March 11, 2013)), accompanying the Consolidated and Further Continuing Appropriations Act, 2013, Pub. L. No. 113-6, 127 Stat. 198 (providing an additional \$2,000,000 to support pre-adjudication vetting of visa applicants).

Visa Adjudication Process

Key Visa Adjudication Process Terms

Inadmissible: Individuals are inadmissible to the United States if they fall within the classes of foreign nationals defined as such under the Immigration and Nationality Act (INA), as amended, Pub. L. No. 82-414, tit. II, ch. 2, § 212(a), 66 Stat. 163, 182-87 (1952) (classified, as amended, at 8 U.S.C. § 1182(a)), such as foreign nationals who have engaged in terrorist or criminal activities or previously violated U.S. immigration law. If a visa applicant is found inadmissible, and has not obtained a waiver from the Department of Homeland Security, the applicant would be statutorily ineligible for a visa.

Ineligible: An individual is ineligible for a visa if it appears to the Department of State consular officer, based on the application or supporting documentation, that the applicant is not legally qualified to receive the visa being sought. If the consular officer decides, at his or her discretion, that an applicant is ineligible for visa issuance, the refusal may be based on statutory grounds of inadmissibility under INA § 212(a), or may be due to the individual's failure to otherwise satisfy the applicable eligibility requirements for the particular visa, as defined in the INA 212(a), or may be due to the individual's failure to

Source: GAO. | GAO-18-314

At the posts where the program is located, VSP is part of a larger visa screening, adjudicating, and issuance process. State is responsible for the issuance of immigrant and nonimmigrant visas, and manages the visa application and adjudication process, as well as the consular officer corps and its functions at over 220 visa-issuing posts overseas.²⁰ Foreign nationals who wish to come to the United States on a temporary basis and are not citizens or nationals of countries that participate in the Visa Waiver Program must generally obtain a nonimmigrant visa allowing them to travel to the United States and apply for admission into the country at a U.S. port of entry.²¹ State's consular officers adjudicate visa applications and are charged with facilitating legitimate travel while preventing applicants ineligible for a visa or U.S. admission, including potential terrorists, from obtaining a visa authorizing their travel to the United States. The process for determining who will be issued or refused a visa contains several steps, including:

- review of the visa application and related documentation, as appropriate;
- collection of biometrics (fingerprints and full-face photographs);
- security checks that cross-reference an applicant's name, biometrics, and other information against multiple databases maintained by the U.S. government; and

²⁰See 6 U.S.C. § 236(c), (d); 8 U.S.C. §§ 1201, 1202.

²¹Ports of entry are facilities that provide for the controlled entry into or departure from the United States. Specifically, a port of entry is any officially designated location (seaport, airport, or land border location) where CBP officers are assigned to clear travelers, merchandise, cargo, and other items; collect duties; enforce customs laws; and inspect persons entering or applying for admission into, or departing the United States pursuant to U.S. travel controls and immigration law

Key Visa Adjudication Process Terms

Screening: Reviewing visa application information for matches to derogatory information in relevant databases.

Vetting: Researching and investigating screened applicants with possible matches in those databases or based on other criteria.

Source: GAO. | GAO-18-314

- in-person interviews, as required.²²

From 2003 until the implementation of PATRIOT beginning in fiscal year 2014, agents at VSP posts manually screened visa applications after the consular officer had already made a preliminary decision to either refuse or issue the visa. Prior to the implementation of PATRIOT's automated screening process, consular officers interviewed applicants and reviewed relevant supporting documentation and security check results, and then made a preliminary determination to issue the visa or refuse the visa. After the consular officer made an initial determination, VSP agents at post then screened the applicant's biographic information against DHS's TECS database—DHS's principal law enforcement and antiterrorism database that includes enforcement, inspection, and operational records—to identify applicants that potentially matched records of individuals who were known threats to the United States or matched to other derogatory information that could make them ineligible for a visa.²³ The VSP agent then vetted a smaller number of applications based upon a threat-based targeting plan specific to each post. On the basis of these reviews, VSP agents submitted a recommendation to the consular officer either agreeing with the preliminary decision or recommending that the visa be refused. The consular officer then decided whether to issue or refuse the visa.²⁴ PATRIOT automated parts of this screening and vetting process, as discussed later in this report.

²²See 8 U.S.C. § 1202(a), (c), (h); 22 C.F.R. §§ 41.102, 42.62. Prior to March 2017, applicants who qualified for State's Interview Waiver Program were not required to schedule or appear at post for an interview for their nonimmigrant visa application to be adjudicated by a consular officer. For example, State reported that 332,980 nonimmigrant visas were issued in fiscal year 2016 under the Interview Waiver Program, which is about 3.2 percent of the 10,381,159 nonimmigrant visas issued that fiscal year. Executive Order 13780, issued in March 2017, suspended this program and directed State to ensure compliance with 8 U.S.C. § 1202, requiring that all those seeking nonimmigrant visas undergo an in-person interview, subject to specific statutory exceptions. The Executive Order further identified categories of foreign nationals traveling under certain visa categories or for particular purposes for which the interview waiver program suspension does not apply, such as individuals traveling on a diplomatic or diplomatic-type visa. See Protecting the Nation from Foreign Terrorist Entry Into the United States, Exec. Order No. 13780, § 9, 82 Fed. Reg. 13,209, 13,216-17 (Mar. 9, 2017).

²³TECS is used for preventing terrorism, providing border security and law enforcement, and sharing information about people who are inadmissible or may pose a threat to the security of the United States. Originally developed in the 1980s, TECS provides traveler processing and screening, investigations, case management, and intelligence functions for multiple federal, state, and local agencies. TECS is not an acronym.

²⁴If the consular manager and VSP agents disagreed on a case, a dispute resolution process was used to render a final determination of the application.

Several other U.S. agencies with personnel stationed overseas have roles in the visa process. State's Bureau of Consular Affairs' fraud prevention managers investigate fraud cases, conduct fraud training for consular officers, and provide information on fraud trends to consular officers. State's Bureau of Diplomatic Security's Assistant Regional Security Officer Investigators (ARSO-I) are to assist consular officers by investigating suspected passport and visa fraud detected through the consular officers' reviews of visa applications and supporting documents.²⁵ Further, the Department of Justice's Federal Bureau of Investigation's (FBI) legal attachés can assist consular officers when questions about an applicant's potential criminal history or terrorist activity arise during adjudication.²⁶

²⁵Under State's Bureau of Diplomatic Security, 122 ARSO-Is are assigned to 107 posts to protect the integrity of the visa system and disrupt criminal networks and terrorist mobility, as of December 2016. ARSO-Is are Diplomatic Security special agents who specialize in criminal investigations of visa fraud. Diplomatic Security recommends that ARSO-Is spend 80 percent of their time working on visa fraud, and 20 percent of their time supporting other Diplomatic Security responsibilities, such as providing security to high-level visitors at post. ARSO-Is often work with local law enforcement and judicial officials to arrest and prosecute violators of local laws related to visa fraud, such as the fraudulent production of local identification documents used in applications for visas.

²⁶Legal attachés are the personal representatives of the FBI Director in the foreign country in which he or she is assigned. According to the FBI, legal attachés' core mission is to establish and maintain liaison with principal law enforcement and security services in designated foreign countries, which enables the FBI to conduct its responsibilities in combating international terrorism, organized crime, cybercrime, and general criminal matters.

ICE Provides an Additional Layer of Review to the Visa Adjudication Process through VSP, but VSP Agents Are Not Consistently Providing Required Training to Consular Officers

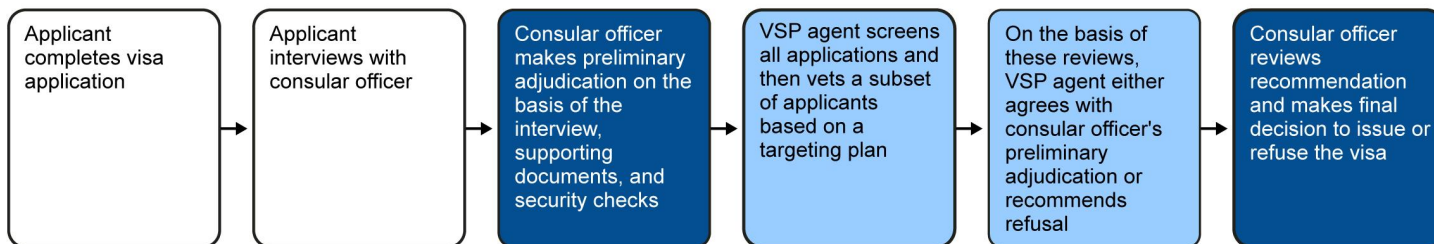
Through PATRIOT, ICE contributes to the visa adjudication process by screening, vetting, and, in certain cases, investigating visa applicants at VSP posts. In fiscal year 2014, ICE, in collaboration with CBP, began implementing PATRIOT on a rolling basis to existing VSP posts. As of September 2016, ICE had implemented PATRIOT at all 29 existing VSP posts.²⁷ PATRIOT includes (1) an automated screening system, (2) U.S.-based ICE and CBP analysts (referred to hereafter as U.S.-based analysts) who manually vet potential matches resulting from the automated screening, and (3) agents stationed abroad.²⁸ As shown in figure 2, the introduction of PATRIOT automated ICE's role in visa screening and created the opportunity for VSP agents to provide recommendations to consular officers prior to their initial adjudication of the visa.

²⁷VSP agents also screen and vet applicants for immigrant visas using a process similar to the pre-PATRIOT process used to screen nonimmigrant visa applicants. In March 2017, DHS implemented a pilot program that used PATRIOT to also screen immigrant visas applicants at 6 VSP posts. As of August 2017, State notified ICE that it planned on implementing PATRIOT for immigrant visas at all VSP posts in November 2017.

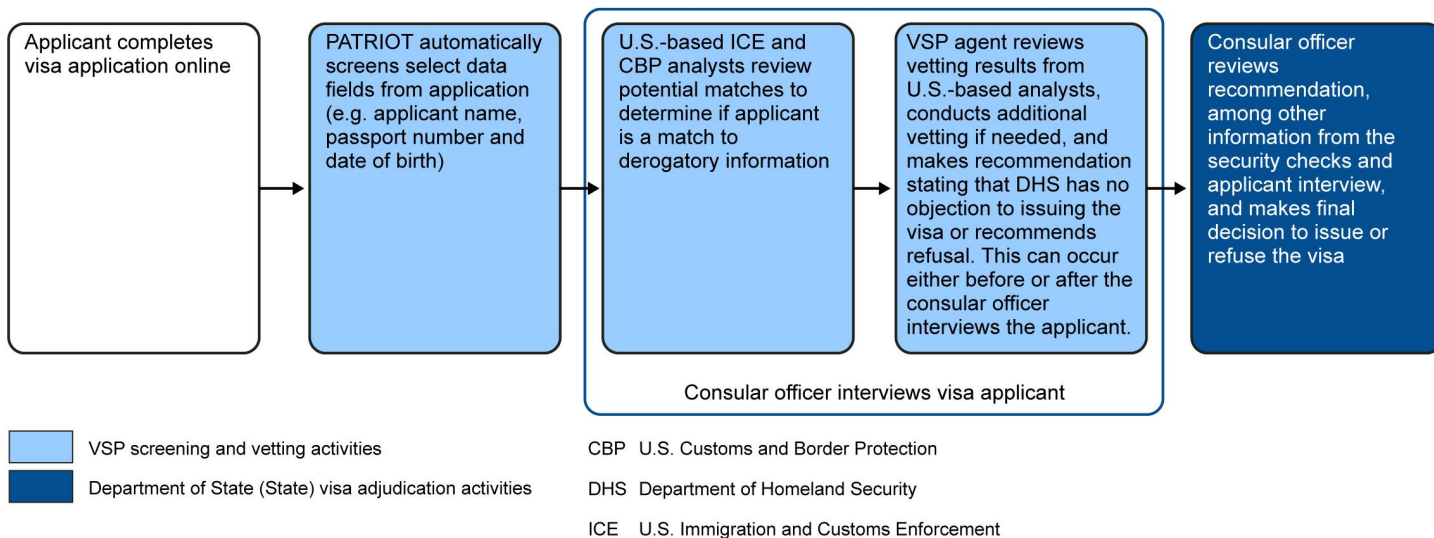
²⁸As of January 2017, ICE analysts conduct manual vetting for 22 VSP posts and CBP analysts conduct vetting for the remaining 7 posts. CBP also conducts manual vetting for two additional posts, for which it screens and vets applicants remotely. Remote VSP operations are discussed later in this report.

Figure 2: Visa Security Program's (VSP) Screening and Vetting Process Before and After the Implementation of the Pre-Adjudicated Threat Recognition and Intelligence Operations Team (PATRIOT)

VSP screening and vetting process before the implementation of PATRIOT



VSP screening and vetting process after the implementation of PATRIOT



Source: GAO analysis of ICE and Department of State documents. | GAO-18-314

Note: Prior to fiscal year 2010, State used a paper-based nonimmigrant visa application form, the DS-156. State began rolling out the new online DS-160 form worldwide in December 2009, and completed rolling out the new form by March 2010.

PATRIOT Automatically Screens 100 Percent of Visa Applications Submitted to VSP Posts and Provides an Additional Layer of Review Against Derogatory Information in U.S. Databases

PATRIOT screens all visa applications submitted to VSP posts. Once a foreign national submits a visa application online to a VSP post, PATRIOT automatically screens various data points from the visa application (such as name, date of birth, and passport number) against U.S. government holdings of derogatory information using CBP's Automated Targeting System.²⁹ The Automated Targeting System includes data from various U.S. government systems, including TECS, the FBI's Terrorist Screening Database (TSDB), and State's Consular Consolidated Database, among others.³⁰ According to ICE data, in fiscal year 2016, most visa applications screened through PATRIOT's automated system did not match to derogatory information. Such applications are automatically returned to consular officers with a recommendation from PATRIOT of "no objection," which means that ICE does not object to the consular officer potentially issuing a visa to the applicant (barring the subsequent identification of any other derogatory information). According to State officials, PATRIOT's automated system is valuable as part of the layered approach to homeland security. In addition, consular managers from 7 of the 29 VSP posts we surveyed reported to us that PATRIOT is helpful as another layer of security checks to ensure that consular officers are not missing any derogatory information that would inform their adjudication.

²⁹CBP's Automated Targeting System is a computer based-enforcement and support system that compares traveler information against intelligence and law enforcement data to identify high-risk travelers. Information on additional data points that PATRIOT screens, as well as the number of data points used, are omitted from this report because DHS deemed the information to be sensitive.

³⁰TSDB is the U.S. government's consolidated terrorist watch list of known and suspected terrorists. Information in the TSDB comes from two sources: National Counterterrorism Center's Terrorist Identities Datamart Environment, which provides information on known or suspected international terrorists, and the FBI, which provides information about known or suspected domestic terrorists. The FBI's Terrorist Screening Center manages the TSDB. The Consular Consolidated Database contains data from the Bureau of Consular Affairs on current and former visa applicants, such as names, addresses, birthdates, biometric data, identification numbers, and country of origin, and also links to other U.S. government systems, including FBI's fingerprint database.

However, consular managers we surveyed had mixed views on the extent to which PATRIOT has enhanced the ability of consular officers to adjudicate visas. Specifically, consular managers at 15 of 29 VSP posts reported that PATRIOT enhanced the ability of consular officers to adjudicate visas a great deal or a moderate amount. The remaining 14 consular managers reported that PATRIOT enhanced the ability of consular officers to adjudicate visas very little or not at all. In general, consular managers told us that there are similarities between PATRIOT's automated screening and the required checks conducted through State's consular name check systems. Of the 14 consular managers that reported that PATRIOT enhanced the ability of consular officers to adjudicate visas very little or not at all, 10 reported that derogatory information identified through PATRIOT is sometimes not helpful because it is the same or similar to information pulled from other systems accessible to consular officers. For example, two of State's main consular systems screen against systems that are also screened by PATRIOT.³¹ However, State officials stated that PATRIOT is useful to consular officers because it corroborates derogatory information found in consular systems, which can make consular officers feel more confident in their adjudications. For example, consular managers from 4 of the 29 VSP posts told us that PATRIOT helps to corroborate derogatory information found from other systems to which consular officers have access.

State officials noted that PATRIOT enhances the screening and vetting of visa applications in other ways, as well. Consular officers do not have access to some kinds of law enforcement sensitive information that are available to VSP agents, such as information on ongoing law enforcement investigations.

³¹We have omitted more detailed information comparing the systems against which State's consular systems and PATRIOT are screened because DHS deemed the information to be sensitive.

Relatively Few Visa Applications Screened through PATRIOT Require Manual Vetting By U.S.-Based Analysts, Who Also Gather Information to Expand Records on Terrorists

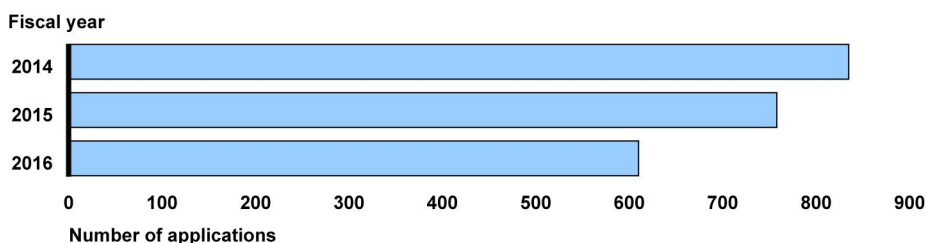
Once the PATRIOT automated screening process is complete, U.S.-based analysts review the relatively small percentage of visa applications in which the applicant's information potentially matched to derogatory information, referred to as "hits."³² According to ICE data, 2.91 percent of visa applications screened by PATRIOT in fiscal year 2016 had a potential match to derogatory information that required U.S.-based analysts to review the application.³³ These analysts use various government systems to vet the applicant, including classified databases. If needed, U.S.-based analysts contact VSP agents at post to obtain information from the visa applicant to help determine if the applicant is a match to derogatory information. If not a match, analysts are to clear the potential hit, which automatically returns the application back to State with a recommendation of "no objection." According to State and VSP officials, clearing such "false matches" helps facilitate legitimate travel. However, if the applicant is a match, the analysts are to summarize their findings, provide an opinion on whether the applicant is potentially ineligible for the visa or otherwise inadmissible into the United States, cite applicable federal statutes if relevant, and electronically send the information to the VSP agents at post. Although U.S.-based analysts provide their opinion, VSP agents at post make a final recommendation to the consular officer on whether to refuse the visa.

³²According to ICE and CBP, U.S.-based manual vetting for PATRIOT is conducted by ICE analysts and a combination of CBP security specialists and officers, respectively. For the purposes of this report, we refer to the officials performing PATRIOT's manual vetting from both agencies as analysts.

³³ICE data indicates that 1.58 percent and 1.18 percent of visa applications screened by PATRIOT in fiscal years 2014 and 2015, respectively, had a potential match to derogatory information; however, this data may not be reliable. For fiscal years 2014 and 2015, ICE defined applications vetted as the number of applications for which an analyst clicked a button in VSP's internal tracking system to indicate that he or she had manually vetted the application. For fiscal year 2016, ICE improved the reliability of this data by defining applications vetted as the number of applications that identified a hit to derogatory information. Because all applications with hits are forwarded to analysts for manual vetting, this definition more accurately identifies the number of applications vetted by U.S.-based analysts.

U.S.-based analysts also use information gathered during their vetting efforts to expand or enhance records in U.S. databases on terrorist identities. For example, terrorism-related information may be discovered by analysts during vetting that could be used to support a nomination or record enhancement to the Terrorist Identities Datamart Environment (TIDE).³⁴ In coordination with the VSP agents, the U.S.-based analysts may submit nominations to the National Counterterrorism Center, which provides information on known or suspected international terrorists in TIDE. From fiscal year 2014 through 2016, ICE made nominations or record enhancements to TIDE based upon 2,203 visa applications, as shown in figure 3.³⁵

Figure 3: Visa Security Program Applications Resulting in One or More Nominations or Records Enhancements to the Terrorist Identities Datamart Environment (TIDE), Fiscal Years 2014 through 2016



Source: GAO analysis of U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement data. | GAO-18-314

Note: The National Counterterrorism Center's TIDE contains information pertaining to or on known or suspected international terrorists. These data do not correspond to the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement data on the total number of nominations or record enhancements presented in its annual report to the Congress.

VSP Agents at Post Recommended Refusal to Consular Officers for Fewer Than Half of One Percent of Visa Applications

Out of the 5.7 million visa applications screened at VSP posts from fiscal years 2014 through 2016, VSP agents recommended that consular officers refuse over 21,000 applications. To determine what

³⁴The National Counterterrorism Center's TIDE contains information pertaining to or on known or suspected international terrorists.

³⁵This also includes enhancements made to existing records on known or suspected terrorists, such as adding or updating information. Further, one application may contain information on multiple known or suspected terrorists.

recommendations they will make to consular officers on visa applications, VSP agents conduct various activities at post, including:

- **Reviewing visa applications.** VSP agents review applications and information provided by U.S.-based analysts, and conduct additional vetting activities, including researching government databases. VSP agents at 18 of 29 posts reported that each VSP agent reviews 1 to 10 applications per day. Further, VSP agents at 8 posts reported that each VSP agent reviews 11 to 15 applications per day, and agents from the remaining 3 posts reported that each VSP agent reviews more than 15 applications per day.
- **Interviewing visa applicants.** When needed, VSP agents interview visa applicants independently or with consular officers and other officials at post. If requested, VSP agents provide additional information to the U.S.-based analysts to assist in vetting potential matches to derogatory information. Some of the agents stated that, instead of attending interviews in person, they send questions to consular officers to ask during their interview with the applicant. About half of the VSP posts (15 of 29) reported that each agent participates in 0 to 4 interviews with applicants per month. Of the remaining 14 VSP posts, 7 posts reported that each VSP agent participates in 5 to 8 interviews with applicants per month, and 7 posts reported that each VSP agent participates in more than 8 interviews per month.
- **Conducting investigations related to consular matters.** VSP agents conduct investigations related to consular matters, such as visa fraud and drug trafficking. As needed, VSP agents coordinate investigations with various U.S. entities at post, including FBI, State, and the intelligence community, as well as international organizations and host nation law enforcement. According to ICE data, VSP agents at 11 VSP posts opened 2 to 3 VSP-related cases, 10 posts opened 4 to 9 VSP-related cases, and 3 posts opened more than 10 VSP-related cases in fiscal year 2016.³⁶
- **Coordinating with other U.S. officials.** As needed, VSP agents may coordinate with other U.S. government officials on visa-related issues. Based on the results of our survey and observations, VSP agents at post generally enjoy positive working relationships with other staff at post. Consular managers from most of the VSP posts (27 of 29)

³⁶VSP agents at the remaining 5 posts opened less than 2 cases; however, VSP operations at all 5 of these posts had not been initiated until September 2016, near the end of the fiscal year.

described their working relationship with the VSP agents at their post as good or very good.³⁷ Similarly, other officials we interviewed on our site visits who occasionally interact with the VSP agents on issues related to visas, such as the FBI legal attachés and State’s ARSO-Is, generally stated that they have positive working relationships with the VSP agents.

VSP agents make the final recommendation to State consular officers as either no objection (green light), no objection with information for the consular officer (green light with comments),³⁸ or recommended refusal (red light). As VSP has expanded to additional posts from fiscal year 2014 through 2016, the percentage of recommended refusals has remained relatively consistent, as shown in table 1 (see appendix III for an analysis of the results of VSP screening and vetting, broken out by VSP post for fiscal year 2016).

Table 1: Results of Visa Security Program (VSP) Screening and Vetting Efforts, Fiscal Year (FY) 2014 through 2016

n/a FY	n/a Applications screened ^a	Results of screening and vetting (percent of applications screened)		
		No objection	No objection with information	Recommend refusal
2014	1,578,985	1,567,432 (99.27%)	6,212 (0.39%)	5,341 (0.34%)
2015	1,977,223	1,959,914 (99.12%)	9,134 (0.46%)	8,175 (0.41%)
2016	2,183,100	2,165,283 (99.18%)	9,721 (0.45%)	8,096 (0.37%)

Source: GAO analysis of U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) data. | GAO-18-314

Note: Percentages may not add to 100 percent due to rounding. Not all of the applicants that ICE screens and vets will eventually appear for an interview and have their visa adjudicated by a consular officer. For example, ICE data indicates that VSP screened 2,183,100 applications in fiscal year 2016 and State data for that time period indicate that consular officers adjudicated 1,625,601 applications at VSP posts.

^aThere were 20 operational VSP posts in FY 2014; 26 in FY 2015, and 30 in FY 2016. ICE data for FYs 2015 and 2016 also includes one post for which VSP operations are conducted by VSP agents at a remote location.

³⁷The consular manager at 1 VSP post described the working relationship between consular officers and VSP agents as neither good nor poor, and a consular manager at the remaining VSP post described the working relationship as poor.

³⁸In cases where the VSP agent determines that there is no inadmissibility or ineligibility, the agent may provide information uncovered by the VSP screening and vetting process to potentially help the consular officer make his or her adjudication decision.

Visa applications are screened by PATRIOT prior to the applicant's interview, but during our site visits VSP agents identified three reasons their recommendations may not be available prior to the applicant's interview with a consular officer. First, VSP agents reported that they are sometimes unable to provide recommendations to consular officers prior to the interview because they need additional information on the applicant before making their recommendation, which the agent can obtain during the applicant's upcoming interview. Second, VSP agents explained the wait time between submitting a visa application and being able to schedule an interview can sometimes be short, making it sometimes difficult for U.S.-based analysts—some of whom work during U.S. business hours—to complete their manual vetting. For example, a VSP agent at a post reported that he rarely provides recommendations prior to the consular officer's interview because the wait time at his post is typically 3 days, which may not be enough time to fully vet some applicants. Finally, PATRIOT responses may not be available at the time of the interview for cases in which the applicant provided additional or corrected biographic information to State on the day of the interview. Any new information is run through automatic PATRIOT screening again, and U.S.-based analysts will conduct manual vetting on any newly identified matches to derogatory information. State officials noted that, although PATRIOT responses are not always available prior to the consular officer's interview, consular systems at VSP posts prevent a visa from being printed until the officer has reviewed a final PATRIOT response.

VSP Agents Are Not Consistently Providing Training to Consular Officers, As Required

ICE data on the number of trainings recorded by VSP agents indicates that the program has increased the percentage of VSP posts meeting the program's training requirement since fiscal year 2014, but some posts have not fully met this requirement. The 2011 MOU between ICE and State notes that VSP personnel are to develop formal, targeted training and briefings to inform consular officers and other U.S. government personnel at consular posts of identified threats relating to the visa process. ICE guidance to implement this requirement specifies that VSP agents are to provide such training quarterly. According to ICE officials, they communicate the quarterly training requirements during pre-deployment training for VSP agents. Further, headquarters-based program managers reinforce the requirement during monthly phone calls with each post. As shown in table 2, the percentage of VSP posts meeting the training requirement increased from 30 percent (6 of 20) in

fiscal year 2014 to 84 percent (16 of 19) in fiscal year 2015; 79 percent (19 of 24) of posts met the training requirement in fiscal year 2016. In fiscal year 2016, the number of recorded trainings provided per post ranged from as low as 0 to as high as 18.

Table 2: Number of Visa Security Program (VSP) Posts That Provided At Least Four Quarterly Trainings to Consular Officers, Fiscal Years 2014 through 2016

Fiscal year	Number of VSP posts ^a
2014	6 of 20 (30 percent)
2015	16 of 19 (84 percent)
2016	19 of 24 (79 percent)

Source: GAO analysis of U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement data. | GAO-18-314

^aThese data exclude posts that were not open for the full fiscal year.

On the basis of our analysis, the training provided by VSP agents to consular officers at some VSP posts does not align with the 2011 MOU directive that ICE develop formal, targeted trainings and briefings at consular posts. For example, consular managers at 4 of the 7 posts we visited stated that the trainings VSP agents provide to consular officers generally consist of an overview of VSP and PATRIOT.³⁹ Although such information is useful to consular officers, particularly those who are new, such general training is not targeted to the specific post, nor does it address identified threats relating to the visa process. Further, VSP agents at 3 posts stated that they considered the training required by the MOU to include answering questions from consular officers on DHS-related topics or initial consultations with the agent when a new consular officer arrived at post. However, responding to questions from consular officers outside the context of a formal, targeted training or briefing is not consistent with the 2011 MOU.

ICE officials stated that their intention for the quarterly training requirement, per the guidance, is for agents to monitor the threat environment and trends in the visa applicant pool at their post. Further, consular managers at 3 of the 7 posts we visited said that they would like VSP to provide more training to consular officers, including training on the threat environment at their post. For example, one consular manager stated that she would like more information or training from VSP on worldwide and regional trends, patterns of concern, and threat streams.

Although ICE's headquarters-based program managers reinforce the quarterly training requirement in their monthly phone calls with VSP agents, ICE program managers generally do not monitor the content of these trainings to determine if they meet the intention of the 2011 MOU.

³⁹Consular managers at the other 3 posts we visited stated that agents provided training on various topics that were of interest to the post, such as human smuggling.

ICE requires VSP agents to record their quarterly trainings by developing a training record in ICE's Investigative Case Management System, which is reviewed by local ICE supervisors at post. However, ICE officials stated that such reviews have generally not focused on whether the content of the training met the intention of the 2011 MOU. Standards for *Internal Control in the Federal Government* states that program management should establish monitoring activities to monitor the internal control system, and take corrective actions as needed.⁴⁰ Ensuring that VSP agents develop and provide training as required would help provide consular officers with additional information on threats that could assist them in conducting visa adjudications.

VSP-Funded Staff Also Work on Non-VSP Activities

Per the 2011 MOU, VSP agents and local staff can work on other activities in addition to their VSP responsibilities, including providing assistance for ICE international investigations not directly related to visa issuance. VSP-funded staff, which includes VSP agents and locally employed staff funded by VSP, dedicated approximately 57 percent of their work hours to VSP activities on average, and the remainder to non-VSP activities, according to ICE's fiscal year 2016 staff hours data (see appendix IV for an analysis of VSP work hours broken out by VSP post for fiscal year 2016).⁴¹ The percentage of staff hours dedicated to VSP activities varied among posts, ranging from less than 15 percent to more than 90 percent. For example, 9 of the 24 posts that were operational the full fiscal year dedicated less than 50 percent of staff hours to VSP activities.

VSP agents at the 7 posts we visited stated that such non-VSP responsibilities include addressing requests from ICE domestic field offices in need of assistance, known as collateral case requests. For example, ICE agents at a domestic field office that are investigating a drug smuggling case may request that the VSP agent overseas coordinate with host nation law enforcement to gather additional information to support the investigation. VSP agents also stated that they may be required to respond to collateral case requests across multiple countries overseas—in addition to their VSP posts—if they have regional

⁴⁰GAO-14-704G.

⁴¹This percentage excludes the five new VSP posts that were not operational the entire fiscal year.

areas of responsibility. For example, one VSP agent stated that he covers such requests for 10 other countries in addition to his VSP duties at post. Further, according to ICE officials, VSP-funded agents at some of the posts also serve as the ICE or DHS attaché for the post, and as a result may have other responsibilities related to coordinating DHS or ICE activities at post. As of September 2017, ICE reported that one of the VSP-funded agents at 9 of 33 VSP posts is also serving as the post's ICE attaché.

ICE Has Not Developed and Implemented Outcome-Based Measures to Assess Program Performance

ICE has developed objectives for VSP and a number of performance measures to assess the program's performance; however, ICE's measures are not outcome-based and thus do not position the agency to be able to assess the effectiveness of VSP in meeting its objectives.⁴² ICE officials told us that the objectives for VSP are to (1) identify and counteract known threats before they reach the United States, (2) maximize law enforcement and counterterrorism value to identify and disrupt unknown threats to homeland security, and (3) increase the U.S. government's capacity to address threats. Other program-specific documentation we reviewed articulates similar program objectives, which are primarily focused on enhancing national security and counterterrorism activities. Over time, ICE has modified or developed a number of new performance measures for the program. For example, in 2014, ICE officials removed 5 of its 6 existing measures and added 8 new measures, for which ICE determined that data could readily be collected via PATRIOT. ICE added 6 new measures in fiscal year 2016 and 4 new

⁴²We have previously reported on VSP's performance management challenges and made recommendations to address these weaknesses. In March 2011, for example, we reported that ICE was unable to assess VSP's progress toward its established objectives because ICE had established performance measures for each of VSP's objectives, but had not collected comprehensive data for half of those performance measures. We recommended that ICE collect reliable data on all performance measures to allow ICE to accurately evaluate VSP performance and report to Congress on progress toward VSP's mission objectives. ICE did not concur with this recommendation, and ICE officials stated, at that time, that performance data had been collected for all measures. We concluded that these data were incomplete or unreliable. As such, we closed the recommendation as unimplemented. See [GAO-11-315](#).

measures in August 2017, for a total of 19 performance measures (see table 3).

Table 3: Visa Security Program's (VSP) Performance Objectives and Related Measures, as of August 2017

Performance objectives	Performance measures
I. Identify and counteract known threats before they reach the United States	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Number of applications screened 2. Number of applications vetted 3. Number of applications identified with derogatory information ("hits") 4. Number of recommended visa refusals 5. Number of recommended visa revocations^a 6. Number of applicants for whom VSP helped facilitate legitimate travel
II. Maximize law enforcement and counterterrorism value to identify and disrupt unknown threats to homeland security	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 7. Number of hours charged to VSP-related activities 8. Number of interviews conducted^b 9. Number of applications that included coordination with the host government 10. Number of recommended visa refusals due to an applicant's nexus to terrorism 11. Number of applications that resulted in at least one nomination or record enhancement to the Terrorist Identities Datamart Environment (TIDE)^c
III. Increase the U.S. government's capacity to address threats	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 12. Number of applicants that had a nexus to terrorism 13. Number of trainings conducted by VSP agents for consular officers 14. Number of recommendations of no objection, with information to the consular officer^d 15. Number of investigations opened 16. Number of investigation reports developed and approved 17. Number of applications for which VSP agents developed an intelligence report 18. Number of applications for which VSP agents coordinated with other, non-U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) personnel at post 19. Number of applications for which ICE coordinated with domestic agencies, including ICE domestic field offices

Source: GAO analysis of information from ICE. | GAO-18-314

Note: According to ICE officials, certain performance measures can be associated with multiple objectives. For example, ICE officials stated that the number of investigations opened, and number of investigative reports developed help to assess its second and third program objectives.

^aAccording to ICE, a VSP agent may recommend a visa revocation when new derogatory information is uncovered that would render the applicant ineligible for the issued visa. This may occur when new information is made available post-vetting. Under 8 U.S.C. § 1201(i), a consular officer or the Secretary of State may at any time, in his or her discretion, revoke a visa.

^bThis performance measure includes the number of visa applications for which ICE has either conducted an interview of an applicant or requested that consular officers collect additional information during their interview with the applicant.

^cThe National Counterterrorism Center's TIDE includes information on known or suspected international terrorists.

^dVSP agents may provide information to the consular officer, which could be helpful to the consular officer's adjudication, but itself does not render the applicant inadmissible to the United States.

With the introduction of PATRIOT, ICE has taken steps to track more program data related to its activities. For example, since July 2016, ICE has reported to Congress annually on data associated with five of its

measures—(1) number of applications screened, (2) number of applications vetted, (3) number of applications identified with derogatory information, (4) number of recommended visa refusals, and (5) number of nominations or record enhancements to TIDE.⁴³ Further, ICE officials told us that they produce performance reports, or dashboards, to monitor performance program-wide. For example, in fiscal year 2016, ICE began developing program-wide dashboards for VSP data across ten of its performance measures. In fiscal year 2017, ICE began creating VSP post-specific performance reports, or placemats, which include data for eight of the measures.⁴⁴ ICE officials responsible for managing VSP stated that they use these dashboards to inform ICE leadership about the program's activities on a quarterly basis.

While these are positive steps, ICE has not developed and implemented outcome-based performance measures to assess the extent to which the program is achieving its stated objectives. Specifically, VSP's 19 performance measures and program dashboards generally measure the program's outputs—or activity levels—rather than outcomes associated with the results of VSP's activities. ICE officials stated that measuring outcomes for VSP is difficult because many of the program's benefits are qualitative in nature. For example, officials stated that it is difficult to measure the outcomes of the investigations they opened as a result of VSP screening and vetting or its coordination and information sharing with other law enforcement agencies on visa applicants. We recognize that developing outcome-based performance measures can be challenging. However, solely tracking increases or decreases in program data, such as number of recommended refusals, does not allow ICE to fully evaluate VSP because such changes in the data may not be an indicator of program success or increased efficacy. For example, ICE tracks the number of applications that resulted in at least one nomination or record enhancement to TIDE. As the National Counterterrorism Center may not accept all nominations or enhancements, a better measure of the

⁴³As previously stated, VSP separately measures the number of applications that resulted in at least one nomination or record enhancement to TIDE. However, ICE reports its total number of nominations and record enhancements to TIDE as watch list nominations in its annual report to the Congress. The Secretary of Homeland Security is required to report to the Congress annually on the basis of any determinations that the assignment of a DHS employee at a particular post would not promote homeland security. See 6 U.S.C. § 236(e)(4). In 2014, a DHS OIG report recommended that ICE include its performance measure data in these annual reports. See OIG-14-137.

⁴⁴As of August 2017, ICE had created a post-level dashboard for one VSP post, but ICE officials stated that they plan to do so for all VSP posts in fiscal year 2018.

outcome of this activity would instead be the percentage of VSP nominations or record enhancements to TIDE that were accepted.

Further, ICE measures the success of the program by tracking the number of visa applications that VSP agents have recommended consular officers refuse, but not the outcomes of those recommendations, which would better demonstrate the extent to which the program is achieving its objectives. For example, not all recommended refusals result in a visa being refused. First, some of the applications ICE screens and vets are never adjudicated by consular officers if, for example, applicants did not pay their application fee or appear for an interview. As previously mentioned, ICE data indicates that VSP screened and recommended refusal for 8,096 applications in fiscal year 2016; State data for that time period indicate that 942 (or 12 percent) of these applications were not adjudicated as of August 2017. Second, some of the applications for which VSP agents recommend refusal eventually result in an issued visa because, for example, the applicants may receive a waiver from DHS or on the basis of VSP agents' consultations with consular officers.⁴⁵ State data for fiscal year 2016 indicates that, of the 8,096 applications for which a VSP agent recommended refusal, 1,204 applications (or 15 percent) resulted in an issued visa with a DHS waiver, and 740 applications (or 9 percent) resulted in an issued visa based on VSP agents' consultation with consular officers. Finally, according to State officials, many applications for which a VSP agent recommends refusal may also coincide with findings of derogatory information from one of State's other security check systems, and the consular officers' refusals may be based on a combination of the VSP agent's recommendation as well as these other findings. Therefore, although the number of recommended refusals may be important for the program to collect, such data does not fully demonstrate the program's outcomes.

⁴⁵The INA contains provisions that may allow an inadmissible nonimmigrant visa applicant to apply for a waiver of certain grounds of inadmissibility. See 8 U.S.C. § 1182(d)(3). DHS adjudicates all such waiver applications. Waivers are discretionary, meaning that even if the applicant satisfies any threshold requirements to waive inadmissibility set by DHS, approval need not occur. If the waiver is approved, the applicant can be issued a visa, provided that it appears to the consular officer that the applicant is otherwise eligible to receive a visa in light of the inadmissibility waiver. For nonimmigrant visa waivers, the Secretary of State or consular officer must first recommend to DHS that the applicant be admitted temporarily despite his or her inadmissibility. Further, per State policy, consular officers can issue a visa even if the VSP agent has recommended that they refuse the visa. In such cases, consular officers are to consult with the VSP agent.

We have previously reported that performance measurement should evaluate both processes and outcomes related to the program activities and that outcome-based performance information should be used for decision-making in a results-oriented management system. According to our Program Evaluation Guide, it is important to select outcome-based performance measures that clearly represent the nature of the expected program benefit, cover key aspects of desired performance, and are not unduly influenced by factors outside the program's control.⁴⁶ Moreover, consistent with the GPRA Modernization Act of 2010, performance measurement is the ongoing monitoring and reporting of program accomplishments, particularly towards pre-established goals, and agencies are to establish performance measures to assess progress towards goals.⁴⁷ Although it is appropriate to measure some outputs to manage programs, outcome-based measures are also necessary to address the results of the program's activities and can help in assessing the status of program operations, identifying areas that need improvement, and ensuring accountability for end results. Developing and implementing a system of outcome-based performance measures for VSP would help ensure that the program is effective and achieving its intended objectives.

⁴⁶[GAO-12-208G](#).

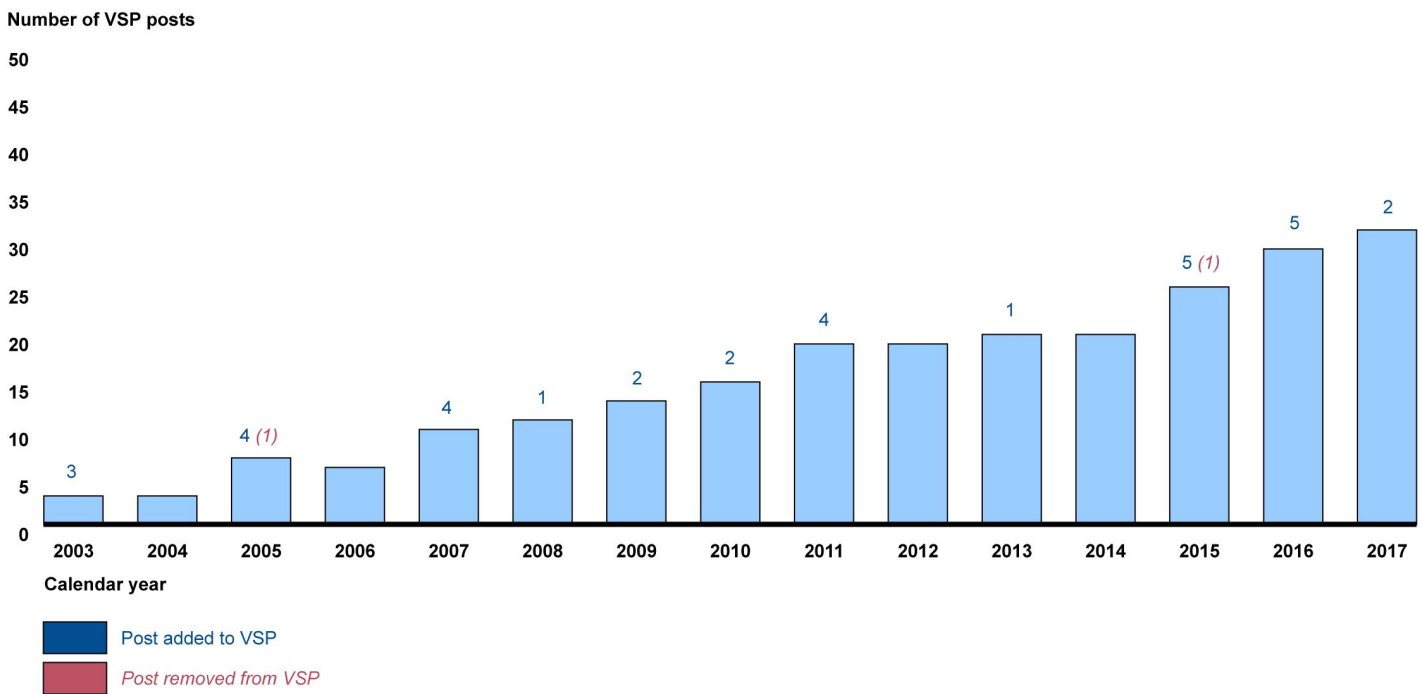
⁴⁷GAO, *Managing for Results: Enhancing Agency Use of Performance Information for Management Decision Making*, [GAO-05-927](#) (Washington, D.C.: Sept. 9, 2005); also, [GAO-11-646SP](#).

ICE's Site Selection Process for VSP Expansion Does Not Incorporate Information That Could Better Inform Resource Allocation

ICE Has Expanded VSP to Some Posts by Assigning Agents Abroad and To Others With Remote Operations

ICE has generally expanded VSP to new posts by deploying VSP agents overseas. However, ICE has also implemented VSP remotely in some locations—that is, in these locations, ICE did not assign agents to these posts and is instead conducting VSP screening, vetting, and investigative activities from another (i.e., remote) location. Since fiscal year 2012, ICE has expanded VSP to 13 new posts with at least one deployed agent in each location, and closed one post, as shown in figure 5. According to ICE officials, ICE did not expand to new posts in fiscal years 2012 and 2014 due to budget constraints, and closed one VSP office in 2015.

Figure 4: Status of Visa Security Program (VSP) Expansion, Calendar Year 2003 through September 2017



Source: GAO analysis of VSP information. | GAO-18-314

Note: The figure excludes locations where U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) has not assigned a dedicated VSP agent abroad. One VSP office was closed in 2006 due to security concerns and later reopened in 2011. ICE closed another VSP office in 2015 when the embassy suspended all consular services. ICE also provided visa screening and vetting services at an additional post from 2010 through September 2014, however, according to ICE officials, it was not considered a VSP post because it did not participate in Department of State visa interviews.

ICE also expanded VSP to some locations using remote operations. In 2014, ICE closed its office at one post—which included both VSP and non-VSP ICE agents—due in part to budget constraints, according to ICE officials. To maintain VSP operations for visa applications for that location, ICE continued VSP operations from a different, remote location. In addition, in September 2015, ICE initiated remote VSP operations at another post by requiring VSP agents at an existing VSP location to also vet applicants from this new post. A VSP agent who is responsible for conducting the remote VSP operations stated that this additional workload is relatively low, but there are relatively high hit and recommended refusals rates. For example, whereas the hit rate and recommended refusal rate across all VSP posts in fiscal year 2016 were 2.91 percent and 0.37 percent, respectively, the hit rate and recommended refusal rate for applications at this remote location were 6.08 percent and 3.05 percent, respectively.

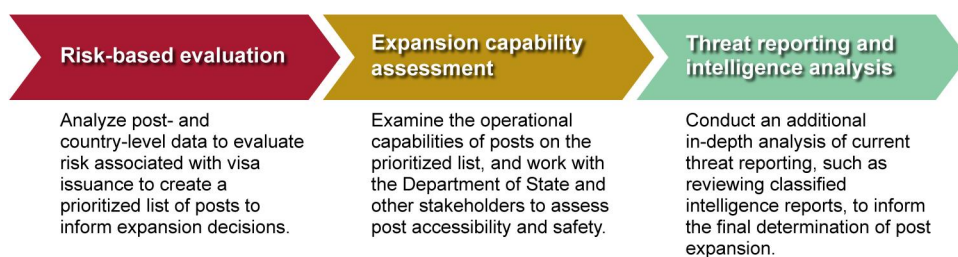
ICE's Process for Selecting Sites for VSP Expansion Does Not Incorporate PATRIOT Data Describing Resource Needs

Although ICE considers a range of information to determine how to expand VSP to additional posts, ICE does not incorporate PATRIOT data on posts it is considering for expansion into its site selection process, which could better inform the identification of high-priority posts and future resource needs. On an annual basis, ICE officials select desired posts for VSP expansion using a multi-step process—(1) risk-based evaluation, (2) capability assessment, and (3) threat and intelligence analysis (see figure 5).⁴⁸ Specifically, the risk-based evaluation analyzes several data points, including the number of matches of visa applicant information to the TSDB, percentage of third-country nationals applying for visas at a particular post, and the number of ICE's open national security

⁴⁸ICE officials have updated VSP's site selection process at various points during the program's existence, including in 2007, 2012, and most recently, in 2017, when they updated the risk-based evaluation to include new data sources. As of July 2017, ICE officials stated that the most recent update to the site selection methodology was in draft form, but had been used to inform expansion to two new locations in 2017.

investigative cases in that country.⁴⁹ This evaluation results in an annual, ranked list of the highest-risk posts, which ICE subsequently uses to complete the remaining steps of the annual site selection process.

Figure 5: U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) Annual Site Selection Process for Visa Security Program (VSP) Expansion



Source: GAO analysis of ICE information. | GAO-18-314

Although ICE officials stated that they have generally followed this approach when selecting desired locations for expansion, they cited several challenges that ICE has faced in trying to expand to posts that are ranked higher on its annual risk-based list. For example, ICE documentation cited lack of physical space at some posts, and delays in approval from State to send VSP staff to post as barriers to expansion.⁵⁰ Further, ICE has expanded VSP to posts that were not among the highest ranked on the annual risk-based list developed during the first phase of the site selection process. For example, 1 of the 5 posts to which VSP expanded in fiscal year 2015 was among the top 30 posts on that year's list of posts with the highest risk, and 4 were not.⁵¹ ICE officials stated that the program chose the other 4 posts based on various factors. For example, officials stated that the 5 posts were prioritized, in part, because they had an existing ICE presence.⁵² ICE documentation shows 3 of the posts as vulnerable or emerging areas of interest based on threat

⁴⁹Third-country nationals are those who apply for a visa at a post outside of their country of nationality.

⁵⁰National Security Decision Directive 38 (June 2, 1982) gives State's chiefs of mission, typically the ambassador, authority to approve all changes to the size, composition, and mandate of staff assigned to overseas posts.

⁵¹For fiscal year 2015 expansion, ICE's prioritized list for expansion was country-based and not visa-issuing post-based.

⁵²In September 2014, DHS OIG recommended that ICE continue to evaluate the feasibility of making all ICE overseas offices responsible for conducting visa security operations. OIG-14-137.

reporting or intelligence analysis, and the fourth new post was critical for U.S. counterterrorism activities.

When identifying posts for future VSP expansion, ICE officials stated that they consider PATRIOT data for staffing determinations, but do not utilize PATRIOT as a data source to understand the potential workload for posts under consideration during its annual site selection process. Although ICE officials stated that they look at historical PATRIOT data during the site selection process, ICE does not use PATRIOT to determine the volume of potential hits to derogatory information from visa applications at posts under consideration for expansion. ICE officials generally identified three reasons they do not use PATRIOT data during the VSP site selection process:

- ICE officials stated that, in absence of further manual review, PATRIOT data are not a good indicator of the risk or threat of terrorism. ICE officials explained that other data ICE uses in its risk analysis better identify counterterrorism concerns, including visa applicant matches to TSDB records. However, PATRIOT screens applicants against a broad spectrum of potential visa ineligibilities that are not captured by such data sources, including prior immigration violations and criminal activities.
- ICE officials also stated that PATRIOT data includes false matches—that is, an initial hit that analysts later determine is not associated with the visa applicant. However, even if hits are ultimately determined to be false matches, the number and percentage of hits is directly related to the workload for both VSP's U.S.-based analysts and agents abroad because U.S.-based analysts must vet each application with a hit to determine if the applicant matches to any derogatory information, and VSP agents abroad must make recommendations to consular officers based on such matches.
- ICE officials explained that the program does not collect PATRIOT data on the number of hits at non-VSP posts because they believe ICE officials would be responsible for taking actions on any of the derogatory information that the system identifies, even during an exploratory or research exercise. For example, if the program implemented PATRIOT for a trial period at a post to which the program was considering expanding, ICE officials stated that they believe VSP would be responsible, during the trial period, to fully vet any applications that showed a potential match to derogatory information. Because the program would not have the analytical resources to analyze the PATRIOT data, nor yet have a VSP agent deployed to that post for action, any derogatory information uncovered

by automated screening could not be vetted, according to ICE officials.

However, ICE officials have previously utilized PATRIOT to gather data to estimate program capacity without requiring that U.S.-based analysts and VSP agents vet the hits. For example, ICE conducted a systems test of automated PATRIOT screening in September 2013 to determine whether PATRIOT is capable of screening applications from all visa-issuing posts worldwide by implementing PATRIOT for a 24-hour period without any further vetting or investigation on potential matches. Further, although such hits may not be vetted by VSP agents, applications with derogatory information exist regardless of whether PATRIOT screens and identifies them, and State consular officers are ultimately responsible for adjudicating visa applications, including where derogatory information may exist. ICE officials further stated that historical data may not provide a reasonable estimate because each post is unique and circumstances may vary each year. However, ICE officials told us that they have previously looked at historical PATRIOT data, such as during the site selection process.

Our prior work on results-oriented management has found that data-driven decision making leads to better results in setting program priorities and making human capital decisions.⁵³ In addition, *Standards for Internal Control in the Federal Government* states that management should obtain and use relevant data to inform decisions.⁵⁴ For VSP, such relevant data can also include information that would help management identify the highest priority posts for future program expansion. Further, OMB guidance states that agencies considering program expansion should conduct analyses that include, among other things, methods for quantifying costs, including an understanding of staffing needs.⁵⁵ To that end, valid and reliable data are critical to assessing risk and an agency's workforce requirements. Because PATRIOT data is a direct indicator of a broad spectrum of potential visa ineligibilities encountered at a post, as well as potential VSP agent workload, using such data to help make expansion decisions would help position ICE to more effectively manage human capital and other resources.

⁵³For example, see [GAO-14-747](#).

⁵⁴[GAO-14-704G](#).

⁵⁵OMB, Circular A-94 (Revised 1992).

ICE Has Not Considered Opportunities for Remote Models as Part of Its Annual Site Selection Process for VSP Expansion

ICE has implemented remote VSP operations in some posts and conducted a pilot in 2016 to evaluate the future expansion of remote operations, but has not considered such models during its annual site selection process. In February 2016, ICE implemented a 3-month pilot program at three posts to evaluate the effectiveness of remote operations for future VSP expansion. During the pilot, the PATRIOT system automatically screened, and U.S.-based analysts manually vetted, visa applications to the pilot posts. Then, a U.S.-based VSP agent made recommendations to consular officers in these posts instead of having an agent being physically located at post. In the absence of an agent at post, the U.S.-based analysts and VSP agent coordinated with other officials at post—specifically, the ICE attaché at the first post, the ARSO-I at the second post, and consular officers at the third post—to obtain additional information on the applicant to verify whether the applicant is a match to derogatory information, or to refer potential investigative leads to other U.S. government agencies. According to officials, following the 3-month pilot, VSP continued remote operations at the second post, in collaboration with the ARSO-I at that location; converted the office at the first post into a typical VSP post by deploying a VSP agent to that location; and ended all VSP operations at the third post.

After the pilot, ICE concluded that it could successfully screen and vet applicants remotely through VSP at certain posts, but that the pilot posts “failed to achieve VSP’s optimal effectiveness as an investigative counterterrorism tool.” According to ICE’s evaluation report, the pilot showed that remote operations could be sustainable under certain conditions, such as locations with a relatively low workload. Nonetheless, ICE concluded that the pilot posts were unable to fully achieve what the report characterized as the VSP’s core mission “to identify, investigate, and disrupt the travel of illicit actors” because, without a dedicated agent at post, the program could not investigate visa applicants, if necessary, or provide additional information on terrorist and criminal networks to other U.S. government agencies, if such information was developed during their screening and vetting processes.

However, ICE’s evaluation of the pilot program had weaknesses, and some of its conclusions were not well-supported. First, ICE did not evaluate how other factors may have affected performance during the

pilot. For example, according to the U.S.-based VSP agent that provided recommendations to consular officers during the pilot, the consular section at the third post was understaffed during the course of the pilot, which made it difficult for them to provide robust responses to requests for information needed to complete VSP vetting. Second, the evaluation report noted that preparation prior to initiating VSP operations at the pilot posts was not sufficient. Specifically, the report noted that all three pilot sites expressed that preparation prior to the commencement of the pilot had not been sufficient. However, in evaluating the pilot's performance, ICE did not consider how insufficient preparation may have impacted performance. Lastly, some of ICE's conclusions about the performance of pilot posts were not supported with sufficient evidence, particularly when the outcomes of the pilot are compared to the performance of existing VSP posts. ICE concluded that pilot posts were unable to fully achieve VSP's investigative mission in part because the posts did not initiate any standalone HSI investigations or generate any intelligence reports on the basis of its screening and vetting operations during the 3-month pilot. However, ICE data for fiscal year 2016 indicate that most VSP posts that were operational the full fiscal year (19 of 24) did not generate any intelligence reports. Further, although all VSP posts that were operational the full fiscal year opened at least one investigation in fiscal year 2016, and some posts opened more than 10, but about half of the VSP posts (11 of 24) opened three or fewer investigations during the course of the whole fiscal year.

DHS and State officials we interviewed identified potential opportunities to expand VSP using remote operations. Specifically, VSP agents at 3 of the 7 posts we visited expressed interest in remote screening and vetting options for other posts in their country or area of responsibility, similar to the regional VSP model ICE has already employed. For example, the VSP agent at one post said that a full-time agent at his post could potentially cover the VSP workload associated with two additional visa-issuing posts in that country. The VSP agent at a different post indicated that his post could cover another post in the region because he already coordinates with consular staff and other officials at the post on other non-VSP-related ICE investigations. Both agents indicated that they could coordinate with the consular sections at those posts. For example, VSP agents could schedule in-person interviews with applicants that exhibit the most investigative potential, but could also refer investigations to other officials at post, such as the FBI legal attaché or State ARSO-I, if necessary. Further, officials from State's Bureau of Diplomatic Security—which manages the ARSO-Is—stated that they would support expanding VSP's remote operations using ARSO-Is already located at post. As of

December 2016, ARSO-Is were serving at 107 posts—83 of these posts are not in VSP. Further, 8 of the 83 posts are listed among the top 30 posts on the VSP’s risk-based ranked list for posts for fiscal year 2017 expansion.

ICE officials stated that their site selection methodology does not include remote models because the officials’ preferred model of operations is to deploy agents to posts overseas. However, remote operations can meet other important parts of the program’s mission, such as reviewing visa applications and providing recommendations to consular officers. As previously noted, DHS has been directed to continue to plan and budget for VSP expansion to at least two high-threat locations per year.⁵⁶

Standards for Internal Control in the Federal Government states that program officials should balance the allocation of resources in relation to the areas of greatest risk, complexity, or other factors relevant to achieving the entity’s objectives.⁵⁷ Further, OMB guidance for making program expansion decisions indicates that agencies should evaluate cost-effectiveness in a manner that presents facts and supporting details among competing alternatives, including relative costs, benefits, and performance tradeoffs.⁵⁸ It should consider all possible alternatives without bias toward its preferred solution by presenting facts and supporting details for each alternative.⁵⁹ By incorporating remote models of VSP operations in the program’s site selection process, ICE could identify opportunities to better utilize finite resources while still addressing the congressional directive to expand VSP.

Conclusions

Since 2003, ICE has implemented VSP at certain U.S. embassies and consulates to strengthen the security of the visa process and increase the U.S. government’s capacity to address threats to homeland security. The implementation of PATRIOT in fiscal year 2014 enhanced the program by allowing ICE to automatically screen 100 percent of nonimmigrant visa applications submitted to VSP posts against U.S. holdings of derogatory

⁵⁶See 163 Cong. Rec. at H3811; 161 Cong. Rec. at H10168.

⁵⁷[GAO-14-704G](#).

⁵⁸OMB, Circular A-94 (Revised 1992).

⁵⁹[GAO-09-3SP](#).

information prior to the consular officers' adjudication on the applications. However, not all VSP posts have met ICE's training requirements. Ensuring that VSP agents develop and provide training on threats, as required, would help provide consular officers with additional information that could assist them in conducting visa adjudications. In addition, ICE collects output-based data on its activities such as the number of applications screened and recommended refusals. However, establishing outcome-based performance measures would help inform management how much a program is accomplishing and whether its activities are meeting the program's mission. Lastly, VSP has expanded from 3 posts in 2003 to 32 posts in 2017, and the program is to expand further in accordance with congressional directive, but in planning the expansion of the program ICE does not fully incorporate data and models that can better inform resource allocation. By including PATRIOT data and remote VSP operations among the potential models for program expansion, ICE would be better positioned to evaluate expansion options to better ensure the efficient use of program resources.

Recommendations for Executive Action

We are making the following four recommendations to ICE:

The Director of ICE should ensure that trainings provided by VSP agents to consular officers are developed and implemented with required frequency and content. (Recommendation 1)

The Director of ICE should develop and implement outcome-based performance measures to evaluate the effectiveness of the VSP and assess whether the program is achieving its objectives. (Recommendation 2)

The Director of ICE should incorporate PATRIOT data into the VSP's site selection process for the posts it is considering for expansion. (Recommendation 3)

The Director of ICE should incorporate remote models of VSP operations in the program's site selection process. (Recommendation 4)

Agency Comments and Our Evaluation

We provided a draft of this report to DHS, State, and the Department of Justice, as well as the Office of the Director of National Intelligence, for their review and comment. DHS provided written comments, which are reproduced in full in appendix II. DHS, State, and the Department of Justice provided technical comments, which we incorporated as appropriate. In an email, a Legislative Liaison Officer from the Office of the Director of National Intelligence stated that the agency did not have any comments on our draft report.

DHS concurred with all four of our recommendations. Regarding our recommendation that ICE develop and implement outcome-based performance measures to evaluate the effectiveness of the VSP, ICE stated that it did not agree with our assessment that none of VSP's 19 established performance measures are outcome-based, and that the agency would continue to utilize some of the measures, such as applications screened, number of trainings conducted by VSP agents for consular officers, and number of investigations opened, as important performance measures. As we stated in this report, it is appropriate to measure some output-related data such as these to manage a program;

however, solely tracking increases or decreases in program outputs does not allow ICE to fully evaluate VSP because such changes in the data may not be an indicator of program performance. Performance measurement should evaluate both processes and outcomes related to the program activities and outcome-based performance information should be used for decision-making in a results-oriented management system. Developing and implementing a system of outcome-based performance measures would better inform management on whether VSP's activities are meeting the program's objectives.

As agreed with your offices, unless you publicly announce the contents of this report earlier, we plan no further distribution until seven days from the report date. At that time, we will send copies to the Secretaries of Homeland Security and State; the Attorney General of the United States; and the Director of National Intelligence. In addition, the report will be available at no charge on the GAO website at <http://gao.gov>.

If you or your staff have any questions about this report, please contact me at (202) 512-8777 or gablerr@gao.gov. Key contributors to this report are listed in appendix V.



Rebecca Gambler
Director, Homeland Security and Justice

List of Requesters

The Honorable Ron Johnson
Chairman
The Honorable Claire McCaskill
Ranking Member
Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs
United States Senate

The Honorable Charles E. Grassley
Chairman
Committee on the Judiciary
United States Senate

The Honorable Bennie Thompson
Ranking Member
Committee on Homeland Security
House of Representatives

The Honorable Martha McSally
Chairwoman
Subcommittee on Border and Maritime Security
Committee on Homeland Security
House of Representatives

Appendix I: Objectives, Scope, and Methodology

Objectives

This report examines the extent to which: (1) the Visa Security Program (VSP) contributes to the visa adjudication process, (2) U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) has developed and implemented a system to assess VSP performance, and (3) ICE has identified and evaluated options to expand VSP to additional posts.¹

Scope and Methodology

To determine the extent to which VSP has contributed to the visa adjudication process, we reviewed program documentation, memoranda of understanding (MOU), standard operating procedures, and relevant legislation, such as the Homeland Security Act of 2002 and Immigration and Nationality Act (INA), and interviewed ICE and Department of State (State) headquarters officials on VSP operations. Further, we analyzed ICE data for each VSP post for fiscal years 2014—the year the Pre-

¹Unless otherwise noted, this report is generally focused on nonimmigrant visas, which are those issued to foreign nationals seeking temporary admission into the United States under a specific nonimmigrant category (8 U.S.C. § 1101(a)(15); 8 C.F.R. § 214.1(a)(1)-(2)), for an authorized period of stay delineated by a particular timeframe or duration-of-status (i.e., admission for duration of a specific program or activity, which may be variable). Nonimmigrant visa holders include tourists, business visitors, or students, among others. Immigrant visas are issued to eligible “immigrants” (foreign nationals who do not fall within one of the classes of nonimmigrants) seeking lawful permanent resident status in the United States with a path to citizenship. See 8 U.S.C. § 1101(a)(16). Certain nonimmigrants—for example, recipients of K visas for the fiancé(e) or spouse of a U.S. citizen or their children, and T and U visas for victims of severe forms of trafficking in persons or other qualifying crimes—are also eligible for lawful permanent residence, provided they satisfy the applicable statutory criteria. This report does not address individuals who are allowed to seek admission to the United States without a visa, such as citizens of Canada and the British Overseas Territory of Bermuda (and certain residents of other adjacent islands, such as the Bahamas) under certain circumstances, as well as Visa Waiver Program participants. The Visa Waiver Program allows nationals from certain countries to apply for admission to the United States as temporary visitors for business or pleasure without first obtaining a visa from a U.S. embassy or consulate abroad. See 8 U.S.C. § 1187; 8 C.F.R. §§ 212.1, 214.6(d), 217.1-217.7; 22 C.F.R. §§ 41.0-41.3.

Adjudicated Threat Recognition Intelligence Operations Team (PATRIOT) was implemented—through 2016—the most recently available full year data on the results of VSP operations. To assess the reliability of these data, we interviewed ICE officials who use and maintain the data; observed VSP agents input data during our site visits; reviewed data system documentation; and checked the data for missing information, outliers, and obvious errors. On the basis of our reporting objectives, we found the data sufficiently reliable for the purposes of this report, including providing summary statistics on VSP operations.

We conducted site visits to seven VSP posts to observe VSP operations and interview ICE and consular officials on VSP. We selected these posts on the basis of their relatively high visa workloads; ICE data on the percentage of applicants that potentially matched to derogatory information in fiscal year 2016; and geographic distribution to help account for variations in visa applicant pools and potential threats that VSP agents encounter in different locations. Our observations from these site visits are illustrative and provide insights about VSP operations, but are not generalizable to all 29 VSP posts. Similarly, we also observed domestic-based ICE and U.S. Customs and Border Protection analysts that conduct manual vetting as part of PATRIOT.

We administered a survey to VSP agents at all 29 VSP posts to gather information and insights from VSP agents on PATRIOT and the VSP, among other things. We administered a separate survey to consular managers, who oversee the consular officers that adjudicate visas and coordinate with the VSP agents, to gather information and insights on PATRIOT and the VSP. For the purpose of this review, we surveyed posts at which VSP agents have been deployed as of January 2017. We also included one post, which has a dedicated agent conducting remote VSP operations from a non-VSP post. We did not include other posts that used remote operations in our survey because these posts did not have a dedicated VSP agent who could complete the survey. We conducted pretests prior to administering the survey to check that (1) the questions were clear and unambiguous, (2) terminology was used correctly, (3) the questionnaire did not place an undue burden on agency officials, (4) the information could feasibly be obtained, and (5) the survey was comprehensive and unbiased. Pretests were conducted with VSP agents and consular managers in two locations. We administered these instruments from March through May 2017 in person at the seven posts we visited, and by email to the remaining 22 posts. We had a 100 percent response rate for both instruments.

To determine the extent to which DHS has developed and implemented a system to assess VSP performance, we gathered information on VSP performance measurement practices and reviewed DHS reports and plans, including ICE's annual reports to Congress on VSP for fiscal years 2012 through 2016, DHS annual performance reports for fiscal years 2011 through 2016, and the ICE Strategic Plan for fiscal year 2016 through 2020.² We also reviewed our prior work and DHS Office of Inspector General reports on VSP's performance management.³ We analyzed relevant information in light of principles outlined in the Government Performance and Results Act (GPRA) Modernization Act of 2010, and best practices for performance management.⁴

We also gathered documentation from State to better understand other potential data on the outcomes of visa applications that were reviewed by VSP agents. At our request, State analyzed fiscal year 2016 visa data on the 7,154 refusal recommendations made by VSP agents.⁵ For example, State officials reviewed visa records to determine the number of these applications that were eventually issued, either with a DHS waiver or in consultation with VSP agents.⁶ Although we did not conduct this analysis,

²See 6 U.S.C. § 236(e)(4).

³For example, see GAO, *Border Security: DHS's Visa Security Program Needs to Improve Performance Evaluation and Better Address Visa Risk Worldwide*, [GAO-11-315](#) (Washington, D.C.: Mar. 31, 2011), and DHS' Office of Inspector General, *The DHS Visa Security Program*, [OIG-14-137](#) (Washington, D.C.: Sept. 10, 2014).

⁴GPRA Modernization Act of 2010 (GPRAMA), Pub. L. No. 111-352, 124 Stat. 3866 (2011) (updating GPRA of 1993, Pub. L. No. 103-62, 107 Stat. 285). In particular, see GPRAMA § 3, 124 Stat. at 3867-71 (codified at 31 U.S.C. § 1115) (relating to agency performance plans and performance measurement). For best practices for performance management, see GAO, *Designing Evaluations: 2012 Revision*, [GAO-12-208G](#) (Washington, D.C.: Jan. 31, 2012); *Performance Measurement and Evaluation: Definitions and Relationships*, [GAO-11-646SP](#) (Washington, D.C.: May 2, 2011).

⁵According to State data, in addition to 7,154 recommended refusals, 9 visa applications had not yet been adjudicated as of August 2017.

⁶The INA contains provisions that may allow an inadmissible nonimmigrant visa applicant to apply for a waiver of certain grounds of inadmissibility. See 8 U.S.C. § 1182(d)(3). DHS adjudicates all such waiver applications. Waivers are discretionary, meaning that even if the applicant satisfies any threshold requirements to waive inadmissibility set by DHS, approval need not occur. If the waiver is approved, the applicant can be issued a visa, provided that it appears to the consular officer that the applicant is otherwise eligible to receive a visa in light of the inadmissibility waiver. For nonimmigrant visa waivers, the Secretary of State or consular officer must first recommend to DHS that the applicant be admitted temporarily despite his or her inadmissibility. Further, per State policy, consular officers can issue a visa even if the VSP agent has recommended that they refuse the visa. In such cases, consular officers are to consult with the VSP agent.

we took steps to ensure that State's analysis was reliable. We reviewed descriptions of State's methodology, checked the data for missing information and obvious errors, and interviewed officials who conducted the analysis. On the basis of the steps we took, we found the analysis sufficiently reliable for the purpose of identifying general outcomes for the applications for which VSP agents recommended refusal in fiscal year 2016.

To determine the extent to which DHS identified and evaluated options to expand VSP to additional posts, we obtained information from ICE on VSP's expansion to new posts since 2003, such as start dates and staffing levels. We also reviewed information on the extent to which ICE has assessed the potential to expand the VSP using remote operations—that is, by using U.S.- or other non-on site VSP agents to review visa applications and conduct other VSP-related activities. For example, we reviewed ICE's evaluation of its 2016 pilot on remote VSP operations, interviewed ICE and State officials that participated in the pilot, and analyzed performance data from the pilot posts. We reviewed ICE's methodology for site selection, which it updated in 2017 for future years' site selection, including lists of post that were prioritized for future expansion. We also reviewed prior methodologies that ICE used to expand the program from 2007 through fiscal year 2017. We also interviewed ICE officials involved with remote VSP operations at two posts to gather insights on their experiences with VSP operations. We assessed these methodologies against internal control standards, best practices for making resource allocation decisions and estimating cost, and Office of Management and Budget (OMB) guidance for making program expansion decisions.⁷

The performance audit upon which this report is based was conducted from November 2016 through December 2017 in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards. Those standards require that we plan and perform the audit to obtain sufficient, appropriate evidence to provide a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives. We believe that the evidence obtained

⁷[GAO-14-704G](#); *GAO Cost Estimating and Assessment Guide: Best Practices for Developing and Managing Capital Program Costs*, [GAO-09-3SP](#) (Washington, D.C.: March 2009). Also see OMB, OMB Circular No. A-94, *Guidelines and Discount Rates for Benefit-Cost Analysis of Federal Programs* (Washington, D.C.: Oct. 29, 1992). OMB Circular A-94 provides guidance for any analysis used to support government decisions to initiate, renew, or expand programs or projects that would result in measurable benefits or costs extending for three or more years into the future.

provides a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives. We subsequently worked with DHS and State from December 2017 to March 2018 to prepare this unclassified version of the original sensitive report for public release. This public version was also prepared in accordance with these standards.

Appendix II: Comments from the Department of Homeland Security

**Appendix II: Comments from the Department
of Homeland Security**

U.S. Department of Homeland Security
Washington, DC 20528



**Homeland
Security**

March 1, 2018

Rebecca Gambler
Director, Homeland Security and Justice
U.S. Government Accountability Office
441 G Street, NW
Washington, DC 20548

Re: Management's Response to Draft Report GAO-18-314, "BORDER SECURITY:
Actions Needed to Strengthen Performance Management and Planning for Expansion of
DHS's Visa Security Program"

Dear Ms. Gambler:

Thank you for the opportunity to review and comment on this draft report. The U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS) appreciates the U.S. Government Accountability Office's (GAO) work in planning and conducting its review and issuing this report.

The Department is pleased to note GAO's positive recognition of U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement's (ICE) Visa Security Program (VSP) and its contributions to the visa adjudication process by screening, vetting, and investigating visa applicants at VSP posts. In addition, the implementation of Pre-Adjudicated Threat Recognition Intelligence Operations Team (PATRIOT) in fiscal year 2014 enhanced the program by allowing ICE to automatically screen 100 percent of nonimmigrant visa applications submitted to VSP posts. DHS remains committed to maximizing the visa security process as a counterterrorism tool to identify, exploit, and disrupt transnational terrorist and criminal networks seeking to harm the United States.

The draft report contained four recommendations with which the Department concurs. Please see the attached for our detailed response to each recommendation.

Again, thank you for the opportunity to review and comment on this draft report. Technical comments were previously provided under separate cover. Please feel free to contact me if you have any questions. We look forward to working with you in the future.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "J. H. Crumacker".

J. H. CRUMACKER, CIA, CFE
Director
Departmental GAO-OIG Liaison Office

Attachment

**Attachment: Management Response to Recommendations
Contained in GAO-18-314**

GAO recommended that Director of U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE):

Recommendation 1: Ensure that trainings provided by VSP [Visa Security Program] agents to consular officers are developed and implemented with required frequency and content.

Response: Concur. In an effort to improve progress, ICE's VSP will ensure that training is accurately tracked to completion and confirm that all VSP posts are providing accurate trainings on a quarterly basis. In addition, VSP will ensure trainings for consular officers relate to security threats to visa adjudication as required by the 2003 Memorandum of Understanding which was issued by DHS and Department of State to govern the implementation of section 428.¹ Estimated Completion Date (ECD): November 30, 2018.

Recommendation 2: Develop and implement outcome-based performance measures to evaluate the effectiveness of the VSP and assess whether the program is achieving its objectives.

Response: Concur. ICE's VSP will develop and implement additional outcome-based performance measures to better evaluate the program's performance. However, ICE does not agree with the GAO's assessment that "none of VSP's 19 established performance measures are outcome-based." Based on the functions to be conducted by VSP as established in Section 428 of the Homeland Security Act, ICE maintains that a number of the measures, such as applications screened, number of trainings conducted by VSP agents for consular officers, and the number of investigations opened, continue to be utilized as important performance measures. ECD: November 30, 2018.

Recommendation 3: Incorporate PATRIOT data into the VSP's site selection process for the posts it is considering for expansion.

Response: Concur. ICE's VSP will explore ways to incorporate PATRIOT data into the existing site selection process for posts it is considering for expansion. In particular, ICE will identify ways to utilize PATRIOT data to assess workload and assist with workforce staffing at potential expansion of VSP posts. ECD: November 30, 2018.

Recommendation 4: Incorporate remote models of VSP operations in the program's site selection process.

Response: Concur. ICE's VSP will identify criteria to be considered during the site selection process that can be utilized to identify potential posts with a sustainable workload for remote screening and vetting. ECD: November 30, 2018.

¹ DHS officers are to review visa applications, conduct related investigations, and provide expert advice and training to State consular officers who adjudicate such applications. Id. at § 428(e), 116 Stat. at 2189.

Appendix III: Results of Screening and Vetting at Visa Security Posts, Fiscal Year 2016

In fiscal year 2016, U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), a component within the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), deployed Visa Security Program (VSP) agents to 29 U.S. embassies or consulates to screen and vet visa applicants, among other responsibilities. In addition, VSP agents vetted applicants for two posts, including the post where they are deployed and another post remotely. VSP agents review visa applications and make recommendations to Department of State consular officers that adjudicate the visas. VSP agents' recommendations will either note that DHS (1) has no objection to the visa being issued (green light), (2) has no objection to the visa being issued, but has information that may be of interest to consular officers (green light with comments), or (3) recommends the consular officer refuse the visa (red light). The percentage of applications with a potential match to derogatory information—known as hits—across all VSP posts was 2.91 percent. Further, 99.18 percent of applications received a green light, 0.45 percent received a green light with comments, and 0.37 percent received a red light.

As show in table 4, the percentage of hits to potential derogatory information and recommended refusals varied among VSP posts. The percentage of hits varied widely among VSP posts, ranging from over 13 percent to less than 1 percent in fiscal year 2016. ICE officials stated that post-specific circumstances explain some of the variation in the percentage of hits. Recommended refusal rates also varied among VSP posts, from less than 0.01 percent to more than 1.00 percent across VSP posts in fiscal year 2016.

**Appendix III: Results of Screening and Vetting
at Visa Security Posts, Fiscal Year 2016**

Table 4: Results of Visa Security Program (VSP) Screening and Vetting Efforts at VSP Posts, Fiscal Year 2016

n/a	n/a	n/a	VSP recommendation (percent of applications screened)		
Post	Applications screened	Percent of applications vetted ^a	No objection	No objection with information ^b	Recommend refusal
1	54,204	4.57	99.42	0.25	0.33
2	59,757	6.22	98.45	0.89	0.66
3 ^c	607	2.80	99.18	0.00	0.82
4	86,661	0.40	99.85	0.08	0.07
5 ^d	10,293	6.08	95.03	1.92	3.05
6	15,373	2.02	98.94	0.66	0.40
7	88,796	4.69	99.34	0.41	0.25
8 ^d	351,837	1.45	99.46	0.33	0.21
9	27,487	3.23	99.69	0.23	0.08
10	12,699	1.76	99.17	0.31	0.52
11	36,390	6.74	98.90	0.38	0.73
12	122,906	4.18	99.19	0.48	0.33
13	58,192	1.61	99.06	0.60	0.34
14	97,666	0.79	99.72	0.14	0.15
15	80,319	13.10	98.68	0.84	0.49
16	67,917	1.10	99.66	0.21	0.13
17	60,322	6.11	98.82	0.55	0.63
18	37,696	4.12	98.19	0.79	1.02
19 ^c	1,749	1.43	99.49	0.51	0.00
20	177,557	3.19	97.96	0.88	1.16
21	46,622	3.08	98.35	1.16	0.48
22	264,858	0.88	99.69	0.19	0.12
23	26,513	3.59	98.08	1.47	0.45
24 ^b	605	4.30	99.83	0.17	0.00
25	44,111	1.76	99.39	0.34	0.27
26 ^c	56,250	1.64	99.06	0.62	0.32
27	91,315	6.43	99.22	0.40	0.39
28	16,679	2.56	98.57	0.98	0.45
29	187,719	0.70	99.61	0.21	0.18
30 ^e	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a

Source: GAO analysis of U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement data. | GAO-18-314

Note: The location of each post has been substituted with a number because DHS has deemed the locations of VSP posts to be sensitive. The numbers for the VSP locations in this table do not

**Appendix III: Results of Screening and Vetting
at Visa Security Posts, Fiscal Year 2016**

correlate to the numbers in any other table in this report. Percentages may not add to 100 percent due to rounding. Not all of the applicants that ICE screens and vets will eventually appear for an interview and have their visa adjudicated by a consular officer. For example, ICE data indicates that the Pre-Adjudicated Threat Recognition Intelligence Operations Team (PATRIOT) screened 2,183,100 applications in fiscal year 2016 and State data for that time period indicate that consular officers adjudicated 1,625,601 applications at VSP posts. Fiscal year 2016 data do not include a post that was part of a 3-month remote operations pilot beginning in February 2016, and continues to screen and vet visa applicants as of September 2017. According to ICE officials, they do not consider this post to be a VSP post because the program has not formally decided whether to continue remote operations at this location as of September 2017. However, ICE did provide data for another post, which also participated in the pilot, because this post later converted into a typical VSP post with VSP agents deployed abroad.

^aWe also refer to this as the hit rate. For fiscal year 2016, ICE defined applications vetted as the number of applications that identified a hit to derogatory information, all of which are to be vetted by VSP analysts.

^bIn cases where the agent determines that there is no admissibility or ineligibility, the agent may provide information uncovered by VSP screening and vetting process to potentially help the consular officer make his or her adjudication decision.

^cVSP operations at these posts were initiated in September 2016, and screening and vetting data for these posts do not represent a full fiscal year.

^dVSP operations for these posts are conducted remotely.

^eAccording to ICE officials, PATRIOT was activated for this post on the afternoon of September 30, 2016, but did not return any screening or vetting results until the following day, October 1, 2016, which is the first day of fiscal year 2017. Therefore, there are no screening and vetting results for that post in fiscal year 2016.

Appendix IV: Work Hours at Visa Security Posts, Fiscal Year 2016

In fiscal year 2016, U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), a component within the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), deployed Visa Security Program (VSP) agents to 29 U.S. embassies or consulates. In addition to screening, vetting, and training responsibilities, VSP agents and local staff spend portions of their work hours on ICE investigative activities not directly related to consular matters. VSP-funded staff, which includes VSP agents and local staff funded by VSP, dedicated approximately 57 percent of their work hours to VSP activities on average, and the remainder to non-VSP activities, according to ICE's fiscal year 2016 staff hours data.¹ As shown in table 5, the percentage of staff hours dedicated to VSP activities varied among posts, ranging from less than 15 percent to more than 90 percent. For example, 9 of the 24 posts that were operational the full fiscal year dedicated less than 50 percent of staff hours to VSP activities.

Table 5: Fiscal Year 2016 Work Hours Recorded by Visa Security Program (VSP)-Funded Staff

Post	Total work hours	Percent of work hours dedicated to VSP activities	Percent of work hours dedicated to non-VSP activities
1	7,821	69	31
2	9,966	81	19
3	4,620	29	71
4	3,648	37	63
5	5,687	67	33
6 ^a	9,719	11	89
7	4,126	43	57
8	3,785	53	47

¹This figure does not include work hours data for the five posts that initiated VSP operations in September 2016 because these posts were operational only one month of the fiscal year. During this month, VSP funded staff at these posts generally recorded more than 90 percent of their work hours as non-VSP activities.

**Appendix IV: Work Hours at Visa Security
Posts, Fiscal Year 2016**

Post	Total work hours	Percent of work hours dedicated to VSP activities	Percent of work hours dedicated to non-VSP activities
9	4,340	80	20
10	7,908	91	9
11	4,084	67	33
12	4,848	14	86
13	12,483	70	30
14	6,967	42	58
15	3,994	94	6
16	7,297	76	24
17 ^b	8,868	43	57
18	6,843	59	41
19	10,960	30	70
20	3,736	38	63
21	4,359	85	15
22	12,765	55	45
23	2,309	83	17
24	4,874	78	22

Source: GAO analysis of U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement data. | GAO-18-314

Note: The location of each post has been substituted with a number because DHS has deemed the locations of VSP posts to be sensitive. The numbers for the VSP locations in this table do not correlate to the numbers in any other table in this report. Percentages may not add to 100 percent due to rounding. This table does not include work hours data for the five posts that initiated VSP operations in September 2016 because these posts were operational only one month or less of the fiscal year. During this month, VSP funded staff at these posts generally recorded more than 90 percent of their work hours as non-VSP activities.

^aVSP operations at this post are conducted by VSP agents at another post.

^bVSP staff at this post also conduct VSP operations for another post.

Appendix V: GAO Contact and Staff Acknowledgments

GAO Contact

Rebecca Gambler, (202) 512-8777 or gambler@gao.gov

Staff Acknowledgements

In addition to the contact named above, Kathryn Bernet (Assistant Director), Colleen Corcoran, Eric Hauswirth, Thomas Lombardi, Amanda Miller, Sasan J. “Jon” Najmi, Erin O’Brien, Garrett Riba, Dina Shorafa, and Adam Vogt made significant contributions to this report.

Appendix VI: Accessible Data

Data Tables

Accessible Data for Figure 1: Annual Appropriations for U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement's Visa Security Program (VSP), Fiscal Years 2009 through 2017

Fiscal year	Dollars (in millions)
2009	26.8
2010	30.686
2011	30.686
2012	33.889
2013	34.561
2014	31.541
2015	49.526
2016	32.561
2017	50.496

Accessible Data for Figure 2: Visa Security Program's (VSP) Screening and Vetting Process Before and After the Implementation of the Pre Adjudicated Threat Recognition and Intelligence Operations Team (PATRIOT)

- VSP screening and vetting process before the implementation of PATRIOT
 - Applicant completes visa application
 - Applicant interviews with consular officer
 - Consular officer makes preliminary adjudication on the basis of the interview, supporting documents, and security checks
 - VSP agent screens all applications and then vets a subset of applicants based on a targeting plan
 - On the basis of these reviews, VSP agent either agrees with consular officer's preliminary adjudication or recommends refusal

- Consular officer reviews recommendation and makes final decision to issue or refuse the visa
- VSP screening and vetting process after the implementation of PATRIOT
 - Applicant completes visa application online
 - PATRIOT automatically screens select data fields from application (e.g. applicant name, passport number and date of birth)
 - Consular officer interviews visa applicant
 - U.S.-based ICE and CBP analysts review potential matches to determine if applicant is a match to derogatory information
 - VSP agent reviews vetting results from U.S.-based analysts, conducts additional vetting if needed, and makes recommendation stating that DHS has no objection to issuing the visa or recommends refusal. This can occur either before or after the consular officer interviews the applicant.
 - Consular officer reviews recommendation, among other information from the security checks and applicant interview, and makes final decision to issue or refuse the visa

Accessible Data for Figure 3: Visa Security Program Applications Resulting in One or More Nominations or Records Enhancements to the Terrorist Identities Datamart Environment (TIDE), Fiscal Years 2014 through 2016

Fiscal year	Number of applications
2014	835
2015	758
2016	610

Accessible Data for Figure 4: Status of Visa Security Program (VSP) Expansion, Calendar Year 2003 through September 2017

Calendar year	Number of VSP posts	Posts added to VSP	Posts removed from VSP
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Calendar year	Number of VSP posts	Posts added to VSP	Posts removed from VSP
2003	3	3	n/a
2004	3	n/a	n/a
2005	7	4	1
2006	6	n/a	n/a
2007	10	4	n/a
2008	11	1	n/a
2009	13	2	n/a
2010	15	2	n/a
2011	19	4	n/a
2012	19	n/a	n/a
2013	20	1	n/a
2014	20	n/a	n/a
2015	25	5	1
2016	29	5	n/a
2017	31	2	n/a

Accessible Data for Figure 5: U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) Annual Site Selection Process for Visa Security Program (VSP) Expansion

- Risk-based evaluation
 - Analyze post- and country-level data to evaluate risk associated with visa issuance to create a prioritized list of posts to inform expansion decisions.
- Expansion capability assessment
 - Examine the operational capabilities of posts on the prioritized list, and work with the Department of State and other stakeholders to assess post accessibility and safety.
- Threat reporting and intelligence analysis
 - Conduct an additional in-depth analysis of current threat reporting, such as reviewing classified intelligence reports, to inform the final determination of post expansion.

Agency Comment Letter

Accessible Text for Appendix II: Comments from the Department of Homeland Security

Page 1

U.S. Department of Homeland Security

Washington, DC 20528

March 1, 2018

Rebecca Gambler

Director, Homeland Security and Justice

U.S. Government Accountability Office

441 G Street, NW

Washington, DC 20548

Re: Management's Response to Draft Report GAO-18-314, "BORDER SECURITY: Actions Needed to Strengthen Performance Management and Planning for Expansion of DHS's Visa Security Program"

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applications submitted to VSP posts. DHS remains committed to maximizing the visa security process as a counterterrorism tool to identify, exploit, and disrupt transnational terrorist and criminal networks seeking to harm the United States.

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JIM H. CRUMPACKER, CIA, CFE

Director

Departmental GAO-OIG Liaison Office

Attachment

Page 2

Attachment: Management Response to Recommendations

Contained in GA0-18-314

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