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FEDERAL WORKFORCE

Actions Needed to Improve the Transfer of Personnel Security Clearances and Other Vetting Determinations

Why GAO Did This Study

Personnel vetting processes help ensure the trustworthiness of the federal government's workforce. Federal agencies vet personnel to determine whether they are suitable for employment or eligible to access classified information, among other things. Agencies are generally required to accept personnel vetting determinations that other agencies have previously made. This reciprocity can promote personnel mobility and help reduce skills gaps.

GAO was asked to review personnel vetting reciprocity issues. This report assesses the extent to which ODNI and OPM have (1) collected reliable data on agency reciprocity in the personnel vetting processes and (2) addressed reciprocity challenges that agencies and contractors face.

GAO analyzed ODNI data on reciprocity for fiscal years 2019 through 2021, and data from five agencies selected to obtain a diverse set of perspectives. GAO also surveyed a nongeneralizable sample of 31 agencies and 600 contractors (293 responded).

What GAO Recommends

GAO made eight recommendations to ODNI and OPM, including that ODNI follow best practices to evaluate the reliability of data, ODNI and OPM develop and implement a plan to ensure that IT systems contain complete and accurate information, and ODNI develop and implement a plan to inform contractors about the status of reciprocity determinations. OPM concurred with the recommendations directed to it. ODNI did not provide formal comments on the recommendations.
View GAO-24-105669. For more information, contact Alissa H. Czyz at (202) 512-3058 or czyza@gao.gov.

What GAO Found

The Office of the Director of National Intelligence (ODNI) and the Office of Personnel Management (OPM)—two agencies with key personnel vetting oversight responsibilities—do not have reliable data on the extent to which agencies have honored previously granted vetting determinations, known as reciprocity. GAO found that reciprocity data ODNI collected from agencies were inconsistent and incomplete, as described below.

- **Data were inconsistent.** Agencies sometimes reported data to ODNI by component and other times at the agency level, according to ODNI officials. For example, in fiscal year 2019, the Treasury Department reported data by each of its components for the first two quarters but reported data at the department level in the third quarter, according to ODNI officials.
- **Data were incomplete.** Two of five agencies GAO analyzed did not report required data to ODNI on the frequency with which they determined individuals were ineligible for reciprocity. ODNI officials said they did not know how many agencies should report data to them, but have initiated an assessment to do so.

By following best practices for evaluating the reliability of data—such as tracing a sample of data records to or from source documents to assess the accuracy and completeness of the data—ODNI could improve its oversight of security clearance reciprocity.

ODNI and OPM have not fully addressed all reciprocity-related challenges that agencies and contractors face (see figure). For example, 28 of the 31 agencies GAO surveyed stated that information technology (IT) systems at times did not have complete information needed to make reciprocity determinations. If ODNI and OPM took actions to mitigate this and other challenges, agencies may be able to grant reciprocity more often and more quickly.

Reciprocity Challenges That Agencies and Contractors Face

Information technology (IT) gaps
IT systems have capability gaps.

Missing information
IT systems have incomplete and inaccurate information.

Lack of trust
Agencies sometimes do not trust other agencies' processes.

Ineffective communication
Agencies sometimes do not communicate effectively.

Lack of access
Some agencies cannot access a key IT system.

Contractors lack updates
Contractors do not receive regular status updates when there are delays.

Source: GAO analysis of agency documentation, survey results, and interviews; GAO (design). | GAO-24-105669

Contractors reported that agencies did not provide updates when the security clearance reciprocity process was delayed. If ODNI develops and implements a plan to ensure that contractors are informed about the status of reciprocity determinations, contractors may be able to plan projects and hire personnel better, which could have positive effects on government contracts.

_____ **United States Government Accountability Office**