

Highlights of [GAO-06-375](#), a report to congressional requesters

## Why GAO Did This Study

The United States Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) relies on about 55 million paper-based files to adjudicate applications for immigration status and other benefits. Ensuring the currency and availability of these manual files, referred to as alien files, or A-Files, is a major challenge. To address this challenge, USCIS has initiated efforts, both long and near term, to automate the A-Files. The long-term effort is now being re-examined within the context of a larger USCIS organizational transformation initiative. In the near term, USCIS has begun a digitization program, which it estimates will cost about \$190 million over an 8-year period to electronically scan existing paper files and store and share the scanned images. GAO was asked to determine whether USCIS was effectively managing its A-Files automation efforts.

## What GAO Recommends

GAO is making recommendations to the Secretary of Homeland Security to help ensure that USCIS's long-term organizational transformation initiative is effectively managed and that improvements are made to USCIS's planning for its near-term A-Files digitization and document management effort. In written comments on a draft of this report, the Department of Homeland Security agreed with our recommendations and described actions that are planned and under way to address them.

[www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-06-375](http://www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-06-375).

To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on the link above. For more information, contact Randolph C. Hite at (202) 512-3439 or [hiter@gao.gov](mailto:hiter@gao.gov).

## INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY

# Near-Term Effort to Automate Paper-Based Immigration Files Needs Planning Improvements

## What GAO Found

USCIS's effectiveness in managing its long-term effort for automating the A-Files cannot yet be determined because the scope, content, and approach for moving from paper-based to paperless A-Files has yet to be defined. Nevertheless, GAO believes that USCIS's recent decision to re-examine prior agency plans for a strategic A-Files automation solution within the context of an agencywide transformation strategy appropriately recognizes the integral support role that information technology plays in organizational and business transformation. GAO also believes that the success of USCIS's organizational transformation depends on other key supporting practices, such as having a comprehensive and integrated transformation plan (goals and schedules) and results-oriented performance measures. With respect to USCIS's near-term A-Files automation effort, known as the Integrated Digitization Document Management Program, effective planning is not occurring. In particular, USCIS has not developed a plan governing how it will manage this program and its contractors, and it has not developed an evaluation plan for its ongoing digitization concept of operations pilot test, even though it has either awarded or plans to award contracts totaling about \$20 million for this pilot. In addition, USCIS officials told us they do not yet know which A-Files immigration forms will be scanned. Without a defined scope and adequate planning, this program is at risk of falling short of expectations.

### A-Files Storage at National Records Center in Lee's Summit, Missouri



Source: DHS.