



Highlights of [GAO-12-815T](#), a testimony before the Subcommittee on Oversight of Government Management, the Federal Workforce, and the District of Columbia, Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs, U.S. Senate

Why GAO Did This Study

As of October 2010, the Office of the Director of National Intelligence reported that 3.9 million federal employees (military and civilians) and contractors hold security clearances. DOD comprises the vast majority of government security clearances. Longstanding backlogs and delays in the security clearance process led GAO to place the DOD's Personnel Security Clearance Program on its high-risk list in 2005. Delays in issuing clearances can result in millions of dollars of additional cost to the federal government and could pose a national security risk. DOD and others have taken steps to address these issues and additional concerns with clearance documentation used to determine eligibility for a clearance. As a result, in 2011, GAO removed the program from its high-risk list.

This testimony addresses (1) the key actions that led GAO to remove DOD's security clearance program from its high-risk list and (2) the additional actions that can enhance the security clearance reform efforts. This statement is based on prior GAO reports and testimonies on DOD's personnel security clearance program and governmentwide suitability and security clearance reform efforts.

View [GAO-12-815T](#). For more information, contact Brenda S. Farrell at (202)512-3604 or farrellb@gao.gov.

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PERSONNEL SECURITY CLEARANCES

Continuing Leadership and Attention Can Enhance Momentum Gained from Reform Effort

What GAO Found

Since GAO first identified the Department of Defense's (DOD) Personnel Security Clearance Program as a high-risk area, DOD, in conjunction with Congress and executive agency leadership, took actions that resulted in significant progress toward improving the processing of security clearances. Congress held more than 14 oversight hearings to help oversee key legislation, such as the Intelligence Reform and Terrorism Prevention Act of 2004, which helped focus attention and sustain momentum of the governmentwide reform effort. In addition, the committed and collaborative efforts of DOD, the Office of the Director of National Intelligence (ODNI), Office of Management and Budget (OMB), and Office of Personnel Management (OPM) as leaders of the Suitability and Security Clearance Performance Accountability Council (Performance Accountability Council) demonstrated commitment to and created a vision for the reform effort, which led to significant improvements in the timeliness of processing security clearances. As a result, in 2011, GAO removed DOD's Personnel Security Clearance Program from its high-risk list because of the agency's progress in improving timeliness, development of tools and metrics to assess quality, and commitment to sustaining progress. Specifically, GAO found that DOD met the 60-day statutory timeliness objective for processing initial clearances in fiscal year 2010 by processing 90 percent of its initial clearances in an average of 49 days. In addition, DOD developed two quality tools to evaluate completeness of investigation documentation and agencies' adjudication process regarding the basis for granting security clearances. Moreover, DOD, ODNI, OMB, and OPM developed and are in the process of implementing 15 metrics that assess the timeliness and quality of investigations, adjudications, reciprocity and automation of security clearances.

Even with the significant progress in recent years, sustained leadership attention to the following additional actions, on which GAO has previously reported, can enhance the security clearance reform efforts of executive branch agencies and the Performance Accountability Council:

- Continue to implement, monitor, and update outcome-focused performance measures. The development of tools and metrics to monitor and track quality are positive steps, but full implementation of these tools and measures will enable the executive branch to demonstrate progress in quality improvements and contribute to greater visibility over the clearance process.
- Seek opportunities to enhance efficiencies and manage costs related to the reform effort. Given the current fiscal constraints, identifying long-term funding requirements for the security clearance process is critical for the executive branch to sustain the reform effort. Further, the reform efforts are a venue to facilitate the identification of efficiencies in areas including information technology and investigation and adjudication case management processes.
- Create a sound requirements process for determining which positions require clearances and level of clearances. A sound requirements determination process may help ensure that workload and costs are not higher than necessary by ensuring that clearances are only requested for positions when needed and that the appropriate clearance level is requested.