

Statement of

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Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs
United States Senate

On

Access Delayed: Fixing
the Security Clearance Process

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Mr. Chairman, Senator Akaka, and Members of the Subcommittee, it is my privilege to testify today on behalf of the Office of Personnel Management (OPM) concerning this critical issue and to provide you an update on OPM's efforts to expedite and consolidate elements of the personnel security investigations program that support issuing security clearances.

There are four steps in the overall process of issuing a security clearance. First, agencies determine what level of security clearance (Top Secret, Secret, or Confidential) or special access level is needed for their applicants, employees or contractors. Agencies must then confirm if the individual currently has an active clearance or if a new background investigation is

required. To support this process, in 2003, OPM implemented the Clearance Verification System (CVS), an e-Clearance initiative that provides agencies online access to current clearance and historic investigative information. The CVS system, linked to the Department of Defense (DOD) Joint Personnel Adjudication System (JPAS), contains the records of over 90 percent of all active security clearances.

Under the terms of the Intelligence Reform and Terrorism Prevention Act of 2004, OPM is required to establish, operate and maintain an integrated, secure, consolidated database of security clearances with information on granting, denial, or revocation of clearance actions pertaining to military, civilian or Government contractor personnel. OPM's CVS system was built on a flexible platform with ample capacity to expand the content of these records and provide access for authorized users. We are meeting with the clearance granting agencies now to determine what additional data elements are needed as well as the most effective methods for recording these actions and keeping the data accurate and up to date while ensuring the privacy and security of clearance data maintained in agency information technology systems.

When a background investigation is required to support an agency's decision to grant or deny a security clearance, both the subject and the agency must provide the necessary data and forms needed to initiate the investigation. In 2004, OPM implemented "eQIP", a web-based data collection system that streamlines the process of obtaining the subject's background information. Today, 27 agencies use this online system and over 17,000 investigations have been requested electronically. Over the next few months, the number

of investigations submitted through eQIP will grow substantially as DOD implements its use for all military, civilian, and contractor personnel. eQIP was designed with ample capacity to process our total projected workloads and is easily expandable if workloads increase.

The second step of the clearance process is completing the required background investigation. As the designated Investigations service provider for over 100 Federal agencies, this Fiscal Year, OPM expects to receive over 550,000 new requests for initial or periodic reinvestigations to support security clearance determinations. Of this total, approximately 80,000 will be investigations for initial TOP SECRET clearances. In addition, OPM will conduct almost 900,000 background investigations of various levels to determine the trustworthiness or suitability of individuals in Public Trust or nonsensitive positions, or in other positions that are regulated by the Government. In Fiscal Year 2006, OPM is also planning for a significant volume of new investigation requests as a result of Homeland Security Presidential Directive 12, the Personal Identity Verification Project.

OPM is working to ensure that adequate resources are available to deal with current and projected high volume workloads. Since 1999, the overall demand for background investigations has risen sharply, reaching unprecedented levels in the aftermath of September 11th. Both OPM and DOD were faced with the challenge of substantially increasing the number of resources available to meet this unpredicted need. In 2001, it was determined that the community would be best served by consolidating the OPM and DOD investigative programs under central management within OPM. I am pleased to report that both the DOD investigative workloads and

the personnel security investigations staff of the Defense Security Service were successfully merged with OPM's Center for Federal Investigative Services on February 20, 2005. At that time, 1,578 staff transferred from DOD to OPM, and over 146,000 pending investigations, along with all new workloads, transferred to OPM for completion.

Parallel with this effort, OPM has been working aggressively to expand our contractor base to increase the total number of resources available to conduct investigations. We estimate that a total of 8,000 employees and contractors combined, working at a full performance level, are needed to handle projected workloads. In 2004, OPM awarded contracts to five additional companies, and today, the six companies under contract have almost 6,000 resources that supplement OPM's 2,000 Federal staff dedicated to the investigations program. We are now working to develop the proficiency of the contractors' newer hires, along with the transferred DSS staff. Over the next six months, we will see significant performance improvement as our staff becomes fully productive and the number of contractor resources continues to grow.

OPM is also focusing attention on delays we have experienced obtaining required third-party record information from national, State, and local agencies' record systems. Many of these agencies were unprepared for the increased demand for their records and, as a result, substantial backlogs occurred. OPM is working closely with these agencies to identify problem areas and provide support to automate or streamline processing when possible.

OPM is also continuing to explore the use of information technology solutions in other areas to improve the overall content or timely processing of investigations, and strengthen the protection of the sensitive information maintained in OPM's records systems.

The third step of the clearance process is the adjudication of the completed investigation by the clearance-granting agency. OPM is currently converting maintenance of completed investigations from microfilm to an imaged file format which will allow for electronic transmission to the appropriate adjudicating office. OPM is also working with the Department of Defense to implement an electronic exchange of completed investigations in a format that will allow for streamlined adjudication by the DOD central adjudication facilities.

When the adjudication action is complete, the final step of processing is recording the action taken and the level of clearance granted in either OPM's or DOD's master file system. This process enables authorized users to confirm the current clearance status of an individual and provides OPM a mechanism to monitor the timeliness of the adjudication process by agency.

Through these efforts, we are beginning to see substantial progress toward restoring acceptable processing timeliness. By October 1, 2005, our approved goal is to average 35 calendar days or less for any initial investigation targeted for "Priority" processing. This goal is achievable as long as current submission levels remain the same as they have been this year, with no more than 10 percent of the total requests received identified for priority processing. For all other initial investigation requests, it is also

our approved goal to process 80 percent of all requests received after October 1, 2005, within 120 calendar days of receipt. We are confident that we will be able to meet these goals, barring any substantial, unexpected changes in our workloads. During FY 2006, we will continue to improve timeliness to meet the requirements specified in the Intelligence Reform and Terrorism Prevention Act.

Mr. Chairman, that concludes my remarks. I would be happy to answer any questions the Subcommittee may have.