

**Statement of
The Honorable Linda M. Springer
Director
Office of Personnel Management**

**Senate Subcommittee on Oversight of Government Management, the
Federal Workforce and the District of Columbia**

on

“Access Delayed: Fixing the Security Clearance Process, Part II”

November 9, 2005

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to testify today to discuss the Office of Personnel Management's (OPM) efforts to expedite the security clearance process, specifically the agency's efforts to reduce the current backlog.

As you know, OPM has been responsible for processing security clearances for civilian agency employees and contractors for decades. Over time, our workload in this area has increased, but grew exponentially after we became responsible for processing all civilian, military and contractor investigations, previously handled by the Department of Defense (DOD), in February 2005. OPM is now responsible for ensuring that each year approximately 1.4 million Federal employees and contractors meet suitability and/or security requirements so they can serve in the Federal Government. The majority of the current workload is focused on completing investigations for the DOD. In fact, approximately 80 percent of our

national security investigations are related to clearing DOD's military, civilian and contractor workforce for employment. Currently an investigation backlog means the process has not been completed in 120 days. By the end of 2006, OPM is required by the Intelligence Reform and Terrorism Prevention Act of 2004 to reduce investigations processing time to 90 days. We intend to meet that goal by adhering to the strategy laid out in the Plan for Improving the Personnel Security Clearance Process which was jointly prepared by OPM, the Office of Management and Budget, and major clearance granting agencies across Government. It represents the collective good faith efforts of all stakeholders to address the problems associated with the clearance process by outlining the roles and responsibilities of each party, actions to be taken, and the agreed upon target goals and measures that need to be met in order for the program to succeed.

When we formally merged our Federal investigations unit with the Department of Defense we received 144,000 investigations from the Pentagon. At that point in time, OPM was in the process of completing 260,000 investigations for civilian agency personnel and contractors.

We were asked to handle this additional workload for a number of reasons. First, OPM has a fully proven process for handling various types of investigations. Second, OPM has an automated system that reduces duplication of effort and shortens the time it takes for investigations to be completed. Finally, we are able to use our

existing fee-for-service system to pay for the cost of administering this program.

Background

During the June 28, 2005 hearing on this issue, OPM outlined the overall process for granting or denying security clearances and identified the various stakeholders for all steps of that process. In July, working with the Office of Management and Budget (OMB), OPM completed an analysis of the overall process and proposed performance goals and milestones that could be measured with data available from OPM's automated investigations processing system.

Since that time, we have worked with OMB and senior representatives from the intelligence community, as well as the Department of Defense, Department of Homeland Security, and others to develop an overall plan for improving the security clearance process. We have also worked together to build a consensus around performance goals and action items to improve timeliness.

Those goals include improving future agency workload projections, improving both agencies' and OPM timeliness for completing investigations, improving the quality of submissions, and improving timeliness of adjudications.

Progress to Date

One of the contributing factors to the backlogs we are addressing today has been Federal agencies' inability to accurately forecast the

number of investigations and clearance actions that are needed each fiscal year. OPM will assist agencies in improving their workload forecasting by collecting quarterly data comparing agencies' annual workload projections with actual requests. With this information, agencies will be able to improve the accuracy of workload projections and to identify changes that require priority planning while investigations and adjudications staffing adjustments are being made.

In the meantime, OPM has been taking significant steps to meet the needs of agency personnel. For example, OPM has increased the amount of staff devoted to the background investigations program by 400 since June 2005 bringing the total number of dedicated investigations staff to 8,400. Approximately 6,600 of the 8,400 are private sector employees, some of whom were recently hired using the staffing resources of five new companies with which we've contracted. We believe the current staff level is capable of handling the workloads projected for FY 2006. This means they will be able to handle both new applications and the elimination of the backlog at the same time.

In 2004, OPM implemented an automated process for collecting subjects' background information electronically rather than through a paper-based format. The OPM system, the Electronic Questionnaire for Investigations Processing (eQIP), is used by agency employees seeking clearances to submit their background information. Since its implementation, the system has been able to improve the timeliness and accuracy of submissions for investigations because it reduces

the amount of time applicants must spend completing forms accurately for the initial and reinvestigation processes. During June of this year, over 370 investigations requests were handled each week using eQIP. By October, that number climbed to an average of over 4,250 each week, largely due to the successful use of the system by military, civilian, and contractor staff.

The investigations process supporting Top Secret Clearances, referred to as Single Scope Background Investigations (SSBI), is a particularly important and sensitive program. When OPM was delegated this authority in February 2005, there were 72,000 investigations in process. As of October of this year, we reduced that number to 54,000, a significant improvement, but an area which continues to be a subject of attention. For requests designated for priority handling --over 13 percent of the total number of Top Secret requests-- the average processing time was reduced from 147 days in June 2005 to 104 days in October. We continue to work toward reducing the time it takes to complete the process for these cases.

Investigations that support a Secret or Confidential Clearance, National Agency Check with Law Check (NACLC) averaged 163 processing days in June. By October, the processing time decreased to 136 days. Priority requests for this level of investigation also decreased from an average of 95 days in process during June to 51 days in process during October.

In June, OPM reported that its goal was to average 35 days or less for the priority initial clearance investigations by October 1, 2005. In October, our Federal and contractor field staff completed all required subject and source interviews and advanced results to the agencies in an average of 34 days for over 890 priority Single Scope Background Investigations.

Looking Ahead

For new investigations received in the first two quarters of FY 2006, it is OPM's goal to process 80 percent of initial clearance investigations within 120 days of receipt, positioning us to meet the requirement of completing 80 percent within 90 days by the end of Calendar Year 2006 as specified in the Intelligence Reform and Terrorism Prevention Act of 2004.

To ensure our processes are successful, OPM continues to measure investigation timeliness including the overall time required to obtain the field coverage and information from third-party National, State, and local government agencies

Finally, I'd like to tell you about the progress we've made dealing with the issue of international coverage. During the last hearing we reported that OPM was working with the State Department and the DOD to establish an international coverage unit under DOD's authority to replace the overseas coverage previously obtained from Defense components abroad. Our first teams deployed in August,

and we will maintain a constant presence in several countries as we work to reduce the existing backlog.

Conclusion

OPM is making significant progress. We worked with other agencies in the development of reasonable goals and targets and are working to meet them by measuring success and making procedural changes where necessary. We are on track to meet the goal of processing investigations within 90 days of receipt by the end of Calendar Year 2006.

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