

SECURITY CLEARANCE REFORM

REDUCING BACKLOGS TO MEET GOVERNMENT NEEDS

The U.S. national security apparatus depends on timely and accurate investigation and distribution of security clearances to protect sensitive information, develop critical technologies, and maintain government operations. In recent years, the federal government has struggled processing new security clearances and conducting pending periodic reinvestigations. With backlogs reaching 750,000 in early 2018 and some defense contractors reportedly waiting 534 days for their employees' security clearances to be processed, the Government Accountability Office went so far as to elevate the issue to its "High Risk" list citing the immediate need for reform.

IMPACT

Investigation and adjudication delays have undermined the ability of industry to recruit and retain highly skilled talent, have imposed significant programmatic and overhead costs, and have a detrimental impact on program execution. The pronounced effects on federal employees and government contractors are especially concerning, particularly those workers that support military, intelligence, and homeland security missions. Such impacts include:

- › An increase in contractor costs, which drives up the end user acquisition price.
- › Individuals who are unable to work on special access programs.
- › Manpower deficiencies that force contractors to no-bid proposals, limiting profits and decreasing jobs in the various support industries and trades.
- › Contractors who face penalties for underperforming on existing contracts.
- › Prospective employees who must find work in other sectors due to significant delays in start dates.
- › Delays in the development of critical technology necessary for the security of our nation and its warfighters.

RECENT ACTION

The Trump Administration has acted to overhaul and modernize the security clearance and vetting system for the first time since World War II. Formally called Trusted Workforce 2.0, the new governmentwide initiative involves one personnel vetting model, three background investigation tiers (down from five), and five vetting scenarios. New standards and adjudicative guidelines are expected to be implemented in 2022.

In April 2019, the president issued an executive order transferring the security clearance program from the Office of Personnel Management to the Defense Counterintelligence and Security Agency (DCSA)—falling under the jurisdiction of the Department of Defense. That office is now charged with adjudicating roughly 95 percent of the background investigations for the federal government.

Congress added several other reforms to the recently passed FY2020 National Defense Authorization Act, including the following provisions:

- › Requires reducing the background investigation inventory to 200,000 cases
- › Sets new security clearance processing milestones, including:
 - 30 days or fewer for a Secret clearance
 - 90 days or fewer for a Top Secret clearance
 - Reciprocity at the same level be recognized within two weeks
- › Replaces periodic reinvestigations with continuous vetting
- › Calls for reciprocity and portability across the federal government
- › Establishes new online portal to access application status and timetables

NEXT STEPS

As of January 2020, the security clearance backlog has been reduced significantly to a sustainable level of approximately 231,000. The DCSA has seen a 55 percent improvement in the speed with which Secret clearances are issued and a 60 percent improvement for Top-Secret clearances. The executive branch must now implement Trusted Workforce 2.0 and ensure that the regulatory implementation meets the expectations of Congress.



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