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House of Representatives

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Opening Statement

Ranking Member Congressman Gerald E. Connolly (VA-11)

Subcommittee on Government Operations

Hearing on "Incorporating Social Media into Federal Background Investigations"

Friday, May 13, 2016

Thank you, Mr. Chairman, for holding this hearing to examine the usefulness of social media and other crucial enhancements to the federal background investigation process.

On January 22nd, the Administration announced that the Federal Investigative Services, a former entity of OPM, would transfer its functions to a new National Background Investigations Bureau (NBIB).

The Department of Defense assumed responsibility for designing and operating all information technology for the NBIB.

I think it makes abundant sense to task our top national security experts with protecting the sensitive personal information of millions of clearance holders.

Today we are discussing another enhancement: inclusion of social media information in the background investigation process.

The Army has a pilot program which used publicly available data from social media sites to enhance information available to investigators during the background check process.

Currently, the Department of Defense is also conducting a pilot program that looks at all publicly available information online, such as news articles and commercial web sites.

I am interested in learning the major findings and lessons learned from these pilot programs.

While social media is a promising and valuable source of information, I am concerned that the government should not retain social media data of third-parties who happen to engage with the applicant but have not consented to waiving their privacy rights.

We must not forget to discuss other ways to enhance the security clearance process.

The Performance Accountability Council (PAC) is establishing a law enforcement liaison office that will communicate with local governments to expedite the requests for local criminal records.

That is a major enhancement. We must remember that on September 16, 2013, Aaron Alexis, a federal subcontractor with a Secret level clearance, entered the Washington Navy Yard, killed twelve people, and injured four others.

The background investigation failed to identify that Mr. Alexis had a history of gun violence. The local police record of Mr. Alexis' 2004 firearms arrest had not been provided to federal investigators.

Improvements in communication between local law enforcement jurisdictions and federal background investigators could prevent future tragedies like the Washington Navy Yard.

I welcome each of the witnesses back from the full Committee's February hearing, and look forward to hearing about their progress on the Administration's plan to reform the security clearance and background investigation processes.

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