TESTIMONY OF
BETH F. COBERT
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before the
SUBCOMMITTEE ON GOVERNMENT OPERATIONS AND
SUBCOMMITEE ON NATIONAL SECURITY
COMMITTEE ON OVERSIGHT AND GOVERNMENT REFORM
UNITED STATES HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

on

"Incorporating Social Media into Federal Background Investigations"

May 13, 2016

Chairman Meadows, Chairman DeSantis, Ranking Members Connolly and Lynch, and Members of the Subcommittees:

Thank you for the opportunity to testify before you today on incorporating data from social media into the federal background investigation process.

NBIB Transition

OPM plays an important role in conducting background investigations for the vast majority of the Federal Government. Currently, OPM's Federal Investigative Services (FIS) annually conducts approximately 1 million investigations for over 100 Federal agencies – approximately 95 percent of the total background investigations government-wide. These background investigations include more than 600,000 national security investigations and 400,000 investigations related to suitability, fitness, or credentialing each year.

As the Administration announced in January, the new National Background Investigations Bureau (NBIB) will be the government-wide service provider for background investigations. The NBIB will absorb FIS and its mission, while adding important new capabilities to improve processes as well as dedicated support in key areas including acquisition and privacy. The Department of Defense (DOD), with its unique national security perspective, will design, build, secure, and operate the NBIB's investigative IT systems in coordination with the NBIB. The NBIB leadership will be headquartered in Washington, D.C., which will facilitate smooth and efficient coordination with interagency partners.

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Since my appearance before this Committee in February to discuss the implementation of the NBIB, we now have in place a transition team to oversee and manage this transition. The team is composed of senior government officials, many of whom come from Performance Accountability Council (PAC) member agencies. These individuals have brought expertise in the background investigations and security clearance processes as well as crucial experience in leading government organizations through complex transitions. The team has hit the ground running and is making progress laying the foundation for this transition.

Social Media and Federal Background Investigations

As the Committee is aware, agencies make security clearance decisions using a "whole person" approach, meaning that available, reliable information about the person, past and present, favorable and unfavorable, should be considered by adjudicators in reaching a determination. Background investigations provide agency adjudicators with the information needed in each case to examine a sufficient period of a person's life to make an affirmative decision that a person is an acceptable security risk.

One component of that approach in the 21st century is the topic of today's hearing – social media. The Office of the Director National Intelligence (ODNI) in its role as the Security Executive Agent has developed a social media policy that has undergone extensive coordination with relevant department and agency officials, including the agencies with significant national security missions and the Federal CIO Privacy Committee. ODNI has taken a deliberative approach in developing its policy. It was informed by social media pilots conducted by multiple agencies, including DOD, giving insight into the issues, costs, and benefits associated with conducting a social media check as part of the personnel security vetting process. Continued analysis of the results of the pilots will guide the way forward and identify areas requiring additional research. This policy is being finalized and, once signed by the ODNI, will be issued. OPM, through the NBIB, looks forward to implementing the policy and guidance to strengthen its investigative processes.

OPM's Request for Information and Pilot Project

In April, OPM issued a Request for Information (RFI) seeking to better understand the market and the types of products vendors can provide to meet social media requirements. The RFI is being conducted in preparation for a pilot OPM is planning to conduct that will incorporate automated searches of publicly available social media into the background investigation process. This planned pilot project will be conducted by OPM in coordination with the ODNI to obtain the results of searches of publicly available electronic information, including public posts on social media, from a commercial vendor for a population of security clearance investigations using pertinent investigative and adjudicative criteria. This pilot is unique from other pilots in that it will assess the practical aspects of incorporating social media searches into the operational end-to-end process; the mechanics of adding this type of report to a background investigation; and the effects on quality, costs and timeliness. In addition, the pilot will assess the exclusivity of information provided through social media checks as compared to information provided through traditional investigative sources.

Conclusion

Supporting the implementation of the NBIB and aiding its success in all areas will continue to be a core focus for the OPM as well as the PAC. I know that the PAC will monitor the NBIB's performance in order to identify, propose, and help drive enterprise-level process enhancements. The PAC will make recommendations for changes to Executive Branch-wide guidance and authorities and will also develop, implement, and continuously re-evaluate and revise outcome-based metrics that help measure the effectiveness of the vetting processes, including the use and benefits of social media.

Our goal is to have the NBIB's initial operating capability officially established with a new organizational design and leader by October 2016, though implementation work will remain to be done after this date.

On behalf of OPM, I am proud to be a part of this most recent effort by the Administration, and I look forward to working with my colleagues on this panel and with this Congress in a bipartisan manner on this important issue. I am happy to answer any questions you may have.

BIOGRAPHY

Beth F. Cobert

President Obama appointed Beth F. Cobert as Acting Director of the Office of Personnel Management on July 10, 2015. She comes to OPM from the Office of Management and Budget (OMB), where she served as the Deputy Director for Management and the U.S. Chief Performance Officer since October 2013.

At OMB, she led the efforts to drive the President's Management Agenda to make government more effective and efficient so it can deliver better, faster, and smarter services to citizens and businesses.

She oversaw the government's performance, procurement, and financial management offices, as well as the Office of the Chief Information Officer. Under Cobert's leadership, the Administration made progress on efforts to improve the management of Federal information technology (IT) spending, to modernize and improve citizen-facing services through teams like the U.S. Digital Service, and to reduce the Federal Real Property footprint.

She also led OMB's work on the People and Culture Pillar of the President's Management Agenda—including initiatives to improve employee engagement within agencies, enhance the Senior Executive Service (SES), and recruit and retain a talented and diverse Federal workforce.

Before joining the Federal government, Cobert worked for nearly 30 years at McKinsey & Company as a Director and Senior Partner. During her tenure, she worked on key strategic, operational, and organizational issues across a range of sectors, including financial services, health care, legal services, real estate, telecommunications, and philanthropy. She led major projects to improve performance through process streamlining, enhanced customer service, improved use of technology, more effective marketing programs, and strengthened organizational effectiveness.

Over the course of her career, she led McKinsey's initiatives on recruitment, training, development, performance evaluation, and retirement services and championed efforts to support the advancement of women into leadership positions.

Cobert also previously served as a board member and chair of the United Way of the Bay Area and as a member of the Stanford Graduate School of Business Advisory Council. Cobert received a bachelor's degree in economics from Princeton University and a master's degree in business administration from Stanford University. She and her husband, Adam Cioth, have two children.