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House of Representatives

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Subcommittee on Government Operations and the Federal Workforce

Hearing on “Security at Stake: An Examination of DOD’s Struggling Background Check System”

June 26, 2024

This Subcommittee has been laser-focused on ensuring that our federal government effectively executes the essential services and functions that our national security demands—while safeguarding American interests against all threats.

As our nation faces malign actors, we need a talented, reliable, and trustworthy federal workforce more than ever to protect our democracy. A rigorous and timely personnel vetting system minimizes the risk of unauthorized disclosures of classified information.

Unfortunately, the information technology system supporting the national background check process has attracted our attention today precisely because efforts to modernize it have been so inefficient, impeding efforts to modernize the clearance process and fill “sensitive positions of trust.”

As far back as 2008, the federal government formed the Security, Sustainability, and Credentialing Performance Accountability Council, or the PAC, to address longstanding problems with the timeliness and effectiveness of the process for granting security clearances.

However, inadequacies persisted, leading GAO to add the government-wide personnel security clearance process to its High-Risk List in 2018. The system had skyrocketing processing times, which created a towering backlog of qualified individuals who could not start serving in vital national security roles.

Subsequently, the PAC launched the Trusted Workforce 2.0 (TW) initiative to fundamentally overhaul the federal personnel vetting system and take on backlogs and other issues. While the initiative takes noteworthy steps towards meeting the demands of our national security workforce, the underlying personnel vetting IT system, called the National Background Investigative Services, or NBIS, may hinder the successful delivery of TW 2.0’s mission.

NBIS was originally created to replace outdated and decades old legacy OPM IT systems in 2019. However NBIS has fallen short of its laudable mission and meeting expectations.

A GAO review ordered by Congress found that after \$654 million spent and 8 years of development, along with \$835 million spent on maintenance of the systems NBIS is meant to replace, DOD still lacks a reliable schedule and cost estimate for fully developing NBIS

Now that the full deployment of NBIS has blown past its originally projected deadline of 2019, TW 2.0 is left floating in the wind.

According to a January 2024 GAO report, of 31 surveyed federal agencies, more than 50% do not trust each other's security clearance vetting process and feel the need to complete their own—duplicating efforts and prolonging hiring efforts.

While the Defense Counterintelligence and Security Agency (DCSA) has made some improvements and introduced new NBIS capabilities since taking over responsibility for the process in 2020, it is, quite simply, not enough to retain, attract, and secure high quality employees.

Extensive wait times force talented agency recruits to pursue employment outside of government when their security clearance process stretches for months and sometimes years. On the other side of the coin, inadequate security clearance processes may allow the wrong people to access sensitive government materials, endangering national security.

Today, we face a global threat landscape populated by even more dangerous adversaries. The bottom line is that our government's security clearance process cannot keep up with the challenges we face at home and abroad if we do not address shortcomings within its basic IT systems.

I look forward to hearing more about how DOD plans to remedy this issue, and how we, as members of this Subcommittee, can collaborate on efforts needed to put the NBIS project back on track.

Our national security depends on it.

Mr. Chairman, I yield back.

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