



PRESS RELEASE: EMBARGOED UNTIL 10 am eastern January 25

GAO Adds Government-wide Personnel Security Clearance Process to “High Risk List”

Washington (January 25, 2018) – The U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO) today added the Government-wide Personnel Security Clearance Process to its “High Risk” list of federal areas in need of either broad-based transformation or specific reforms to prevent waste, fraud, abuse, and mismanagement.

Although a regular update to its High Risk List is scheduled for early 2019, US. Comptroller General Gene L. Dodaro determined it was important to call attention to the challenges of the government-wide personnel security clearance process now. “A high-quality and timely personnel security clearance process is essential to minimize the risks of unauthorized disclosures of classified information and to help ensure that information about individuals with criminal histories or other questionable behavior is identified and assessed.” Dodaro said. “Our objective for the High Risk List is to bring attention to policymakers of the need for action sooner, rather than later. Renewed and strong top leadership commitment will be critical to facilitate progress in reducing the backlog and completing key improvements to the personnel security clearance process.”

Currently, executive branch agencies are unable to investigate and process personnel security clearances in a timely manner, contributing to a significant backlog of background investigations, totaling more than 700,000 cases as of September 2017. Despite the Security, Suitability, and Credentialing Performance Accountability Council making progress in reforming personnel security clearance processes, the government faces challenges in reversing this trend. Additionally, government-wide measures for the quality of background investigations have not yet been established, and there have been significant delays in completing some key reform efforts.

GAO added the government-wide personnel security clearance process to the High Risk List due, in part, to challenges identified in two recent reports on the personnel security clearance process ([GAO-18-117](#) and [GAO-18-29](#)). In these reports GAO identified (1) a significant backlog of background investigations; (2) a lack of long-term goals for increasing federal and contractor-provided investigator capacity to address the backlog; (3) delays in the timely processing of security clearances; (4) the need to identify milestones for establishing government-wide performance measures for the quality of background investigations; (5) delays in completing key initiatives of the security clearance reform effort; and (6) concerns by DOD about the development of a new information technology system for the personnel security clearance process and its connections to Office of Personnel Management (OPM) legacy systems.

GAO has previously identified personnel security clearance processes as a high risk area. In 2005, GAO added the Department of Defense’s (DOD) personnel security clearance program to its High Risk List due to long-standing issues with timeliness and a growing backlog. In the 2007 high risk update, GAO identified additional issues related to the quality of OPM’s background investigations and DOD’s adjudications. However the program was removed from the List in 2011 because it had made substantial progress in rectifying these issues. After GAO removes

areas from the High Risk List, it continues to monitor them to determine if the improvements previously noted are sustained and whether new issues emerge. If significant problems again arise, GAO will put an issue back on the List, as it has done in this case.

After the issuance of GAO's two reports noted above, the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2018 was signed into law. This legislation will have an impact on the personnel security clearance process by transferring responsibility for conducting background investigations for certain DOD personnel from OPM back to DOD. Specifically, the Act includes a provision that, among other things, authorizes DOD to conduct background investigations for personnel security clearances for its own personnel. Continued and coordinated focus on the challenges GAO has identified, and the personnel security clearance process generally, will be necessary to facilitate the transfer of background investigations from OPM to DOD. Additionally, policymaker and stakeholder attention will also be essential to help ensure the smooth and timely processing of personnel security clearances government-wide.

Comptroller General Dodaro will be sending a letter to the Security, Suitability, and Credentialing Performance Accountability Council Principals—the Deputy Director for Management of the Office of Management and Budget, the Director of National Intelligence, the Director of OPM, and the Under Secretary of Defense for Intelligence—alerting them to the concerns leading to GAO's decision and identifying recommendations to address them. The Security, Suitability, and Credentialing Performance Accountability Council, led by the Principals, is a government-wide structure responsible for driving the implementation of and overseeing security and suitability reform efforts.

The addition of the government-wide personnel security clearance process leaves 35 programs and activities on GAO's current High Risk List. There were 14 areas on the High Risk List when the program was launched in 1990. Since then, there have been 47 additions, 24 removals, and two areas that were consolidated. GAO updates the list every two years near the start of each new Congress to help set oversight agendas. Congress and the executive branch have increasingly turned to GAO's High Risk List for ideas on how to improve government economy, efficiency, effectiveness, and equity.

For questions please contact Chuck Young, Managing Director of Public Affairs, at youngc1@gao.gov or (202) 512-4800.

#####

The Government Accountability Office, known as the investigative arm of Congress, is an independent, nonpartisan agency that exists to support Congress in meeting its constitutional responsibilities. GAO also works to improve the performance of the federal government and ensure its accountability to the American people. The agency examines the use of public funds; evaluates federal programs and policies; and provides analyses, recommendations, and other assistance to help Congress make informed oversight, policy, and funding decisions. GAO provides Congress with timely information that is objective, fact-based, nonideological, fair, and balanced. GAO's commitment to good government is reflected in its core values of accountability, integrity, and reliability.