GAO Highlights

Highlights of GAO-17-706, a report to congressional addressees

REFUGEES

Actions Needed by State Department and DHS to Further Strengthen Applicant Screening Process and Assess Fraud Risks

Why GAO Did This Study

Increases in the number of USRAP applicants approved for resettlement in the United States from countries where terrorists operate have raised questions about the adequacy of applicant screening.

GAO was asked to review the refugee screening process. This report (1) describes what State and DHS data indicate about the characteristics and outcomes of USRAP applications, (2) analyzes the extent to which State and RSCs have policies and procedures on refugee case processing and State oversees RSC activities, (3) analyzes the extent to which USCIS has policies and procedures for adjudicating refugee applications, and (4) analyzes the extent to which State and USCIS have mechanisms in place to detect and prevent applicant fraud. GAO reviewed State and DHS policies, analyzed refugee processing data and reports, observed a nongeneralizable sample of refugee screening interviews in four countries in 2016 (selected based on application data and other factors), and interviewed State and DHS officials and RSC staff.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that State (1) develop outcome-based indicators to measure RSC performance and (2) monitor against these measures; USCIS (1) enhance training to temporary officers, (2) develop a plan to deploy additional officers with national security expertise, and (3) conduct regular quality assurance assessments; and State and DHS jointly conduct regular fraud risk assessments. State and DHS concurred with GAO's recommendations.

View GAO-17-706. For more information, contact Rebecca Gambler at (202) 512-8777 or gamblerr@gao.gov.

What GAO Found

From fiscal year 2011 through June 2016, the U.S. Refugee Admission Program (USRAP) received about 655,000 applications and referrals—with most referrals coming from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees—and approximately 227,000 applicants were admitted to the United States (see figure). More than 75 percent of the applications and referrals were from refugees fleeing six countries—Iraq, Burma, Syria, Somalia, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and Bhutan. Nine Department of State- (State) funded Resettlement Support Centers (RSC) located abroad process applications by conducting prescreening interviews and initiating security checks, among other activities. Such information is subsequently used by the Department of Homeland Security's (DHS) U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS), which conducts in-person interviews with applicants and assesses eligibility for refugee status to determine whether to approve or deny them for resettlement.

Status of U.S. Refugee Admissions Program (USRAP) Applications Received from Fiscal Year 2011 through June 2016, by Fiscal Year (as of June 2016)
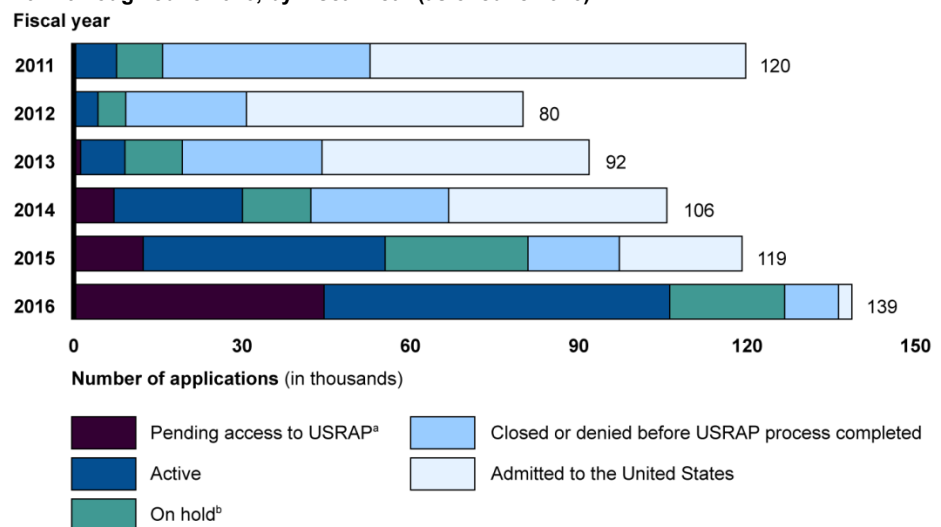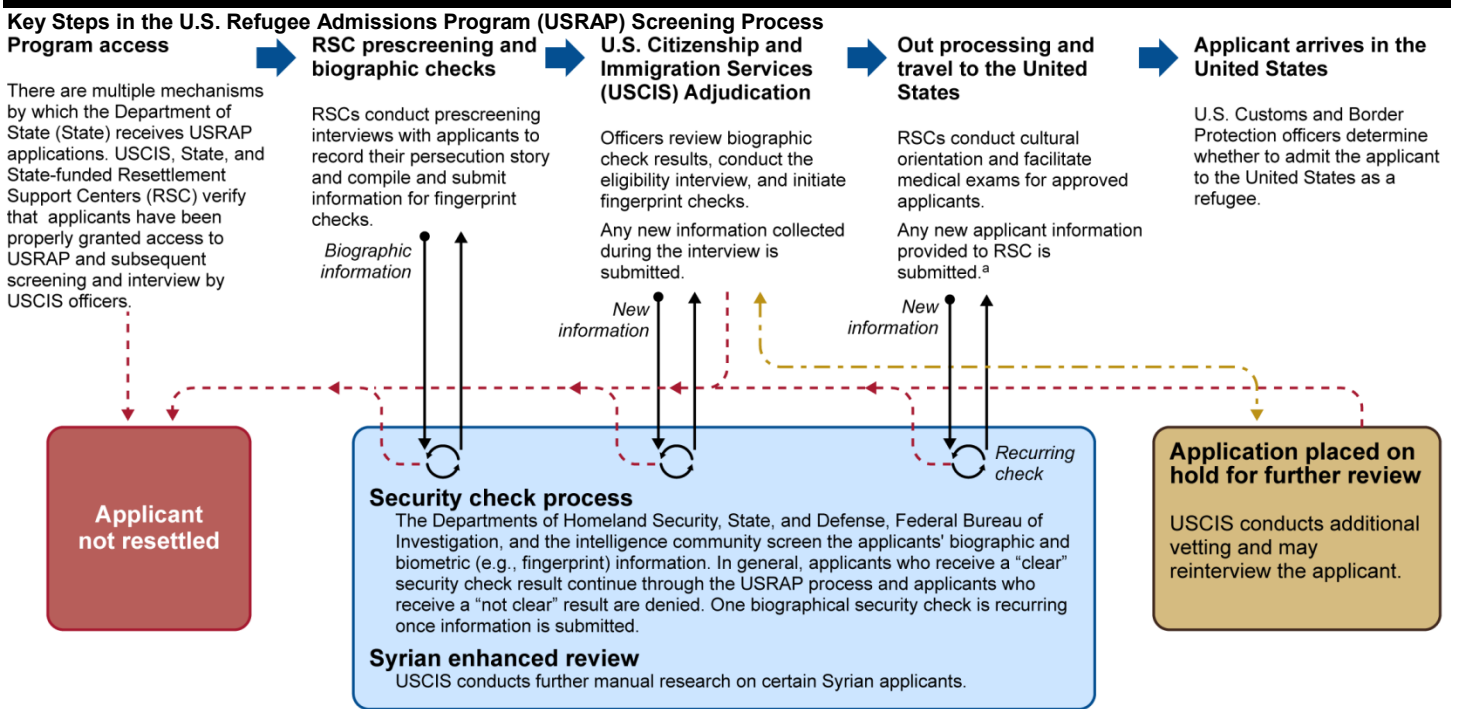

Source: GAO analysis of USRAP data. | GAO-17-706

[a]After receiving an application, USRAP partners determine whether the applicant qualifies for a U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) interview.
[b]USCIS officers may place an application on hold after their interview if they determine that additional information is needed to adjudicate the application.

State and RSCs have policies and procedures for processing refugee applications, but State has not established outcome based-performance measures. For example, State's *USRAP Overseas Processing Manual* includes requirements for information RSCs should collect when prescreening applicants and initiating national security checks, among other things. GAO observed 27 prescreening interviews conducted by RSC caseworkers in four countries and found that they generally adhered to State requirements. Further, State has control activities in place to monitor how RSCs implement policies and procedures. However, State has not established outcome-based performance indicators for key activities—such as prescreening applicants and accurate case

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file preparation—or monitored RSC performance consistently across such indicators. Developing outcome-based performance indicators, and monitoring RSC performance against such indicators on a regular basis, would better position State to determine whether RSCs are processing refugee applications in accordance with their responsibilities.

USCIS has policies and procedures for adjudicating applications—including how its officers are to conduct interviews, review case files, and make decisions on refugee applications—but could improve training, the process for adjudicating applicants with national security concerns, and quality assurance assessments. For example, USCIS has developed an assessment tool that officers are to use when interviewing applicants. GAO observed 29 USCIS interviews and found that officers completed all parts of the assessment. USCIS also provides specialized training to all officers who adjudicate applications abroad, but could provide additional training for officers who work on a temporary basis, which would better prepare them to adjudicate applications. In addition, USCIS provides guidance to help officers identify national security concerns in applications and has taken steps to address challenges with adjudicating such cases. For example, in 2016, USCIS completed a pilot that included sending officers with national security expertise overseas to support interviewing officers in some locations. USCIS determined the pilot was successful and has taken steps to formalize it. However, USCIS has not developed and implemented a plan for deploying these additional officers, whose expertise could help improve the efficiency and effectiveness of the adjudication process. Further, USCIS does not conduct regular quality assurance assessments of refugee adjudications, consistent with federal internal control standards. Conducting regular assessments of refugee adjudications would allow USCIS to target training or guidance to areas of most need.

Key Steps in the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program (USRAP) Screening Process

Source: GAO analysis of Department of State and USCIS information. | GAO-17-706

[a]All persons traveling to the United States by air are subject to standard U.S. government vetting practices.

State and USCIS have mechanisms in place to detect and prevent applicant fraud in USRAP, such as requiring DNA testing for certain applicants, but have not jointly assessed applicant fraud risks program-wide. Applicant fraud may include document and identity fraud, among other things. USCIS officers can encounter indicators of fraud while adjudicating refugee applications, and fraud has occurred in USRAP programs in the past. Because the management of USRAP involves several agencies, jointly and regularly assessing fraud risks program-wide, consistent with leading fraud risk management practices and federal internal control standards, could help State and USCIS ensure that fraud detection and prevention efforts across USRAP are targeted to those areas that are of highest risk.

This is a public version of a sensitive report issued in June 2017. Information that the Departments of Defense, Homeland Security, and State deemed to be sensitive is not included in this report.