

# GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-15-415](#), a report to congressional requesters

## Why GAO Did This Study

Each year, the Department of Homeland Security's (DHS) USCIS processes millions of applications for persons seeking to study, work, visit, or live in the United States. USCIS has been working since 2005 to transform its outdated systems into an account-based system with electronic adjudication and case management tools that will allow applicants to apply and track the progress of their application online. In 2011, USCIS reported that this effort, called the Transformation Program, was to be completed no later than June 2014 at a cost of up to \$2.1 billion.

Given the critical importance of the Transformation Program, GAO was asked to review it. This report (1) discusses the program's current status, including the impact of changes made, and (2) assesses the extent to which DHS and USCIS are executing effective program oversight and governance.

To do so, GAO reviewed DHS and USCIS documents, interviewed relevant officials, and compared program documentation and actions to DHS and USCIS policy and guidance and GAO and industry leading information technology practices.

## What GAO Recommends

GAO is making recommendations to DHS components and offices to improve governance and oversight of the Transformation Program. DHS agreed with the recommendations, but did not agree with GAO's evaluation of the impact of changes made to the acquisition strategy. GAO maintains its position on the impact of changes, as discussed in the report.

View [GAO-15-415](#). For more information, contact Carol R. Cha at (202) 512-4456 or [chac@gao.gov](mailto:chac@gao.gov).

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# IMMIGRATION BENEFITS SYSTEM

## Better Informed Decision Making Needed on Transformation Program

### What GAO Found

The U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services' (USCIS) currently expects that its Transformation Program will cost up to \$3.1 billion and be fully deployed no later than March 2019, which is an increase of approximately \$1 billion and delay of over 4 years from its initial July 2011 baseline. In March 2012, the program began to significantly change its acquisition strategy to address various technical challenges (see table).

#### Key Changes to the Transformation Program's Acquisition Strategy

Key change	Previous approach	New approach
Software development	Waterfall: sequential phases, often with delivery years after start	Agile: delivery in small, short increments
Contracting approach	Single contractor	Multiple contractors with USCIS as system integrator
Program architecture	Wide use of proprietary commercial off the shelf products	Wide use of open source software (i.e., publicly available)

Source: GAO analysis of USCIS documentation. | GAO-15-415

These changes have significantly delayed the program's planned schedule, which in turn has had adverse effects on when USCIS expects to achieve cost savings, operational efficiencies, and other benefits. Among other things, USCIS has yet to achieve the goal of enhancing national security by authenticating users and integrating with external agency databases.

While the program's two key governance bodies have taken actions aligned with leading IT management practices, neither has used reliable information to make decisions and inform external reporting (see table). For example, one governing body's vote in March 2013 to migrate to a new architecture was based in part on savings that did not account for the added costs of merging data from the old architecture. The ability of USCIS, DHS, and Congress to effectively monitor program performance may be limited until these bodies more effectively use reliable information to inform their program evaluations.

#### Extent to Which Program Governance Bodies Met Leading Practices for Oversight

Leading practice	Acquisition Review Board	Executive Steering Committee
Monitor project's performance and progress toward predefined cost and schedule	◐	◐
Ensure that corrective actions are identified and assigned to the appropriate parties at the first sign of cost, schedule, or performance problems	●	●
Ensure that corrective actions are tracked until the desired outcomes are achieved	◐	●
Rely on complete and accurate data to review performance against stated expectations	○	○

● Implemented ◐ Partially implemented ○ Not implemented

Source: GAO analysis of USCIS documentation. | GAO-15-415