

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-24-106153](#), a report to congressional requesters

Why GAO Did This Study

DHS has a wide-ranging and disparate mission, including counterterrorism, cybersecurity, border security, and disaster response. Hiring qualified and trustworthy individuals across a wide range of positions in a timely manner is critical to DHS's ability to protect the homeland. When hiring, DHS and its components use a vetting process to decide whether a candidate can begin working while DHS completes their background investigation.

GAO was asked to review DHS's hiring and vetting processes. This report examines, among other things (1) the extent to which DHS and select components met their time-to-hire targets and reported these data for priority positions in fiscal year 2022; and (2) challenges selected DHS component officials have faced in vetting candidates in a timely manner and steps taken to address them.

GAO reviewed relevant federal laws, policies, and DHS documents and collected and analyzed DHS data for select priority positions. GAO also interviewed officials from DHS and select components responsible for hiring and vetting efforts as well as officials from OPM and the Department of Defense that oversee federal hiring and personnel vetting efforts.

What GAO Recommends

GAO is making four recommendations to DHS, including to improve data reporting and include hiring and vetting personnel in existing working groups and other forums to share practices with one another. DHS concurred with all four of our recommendations and has plans to address each of them.

View [GAO-24-106153](#). For more information, contact Christopher P. Currie at (404) 679-1875 or curriec@gao.gov.

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DHS HIRING

Additional Actions Needed to Enhance Vetting Processes Across the Department

What GAO Found

The Department of Homeland Security (DHS) has designated positions with the highest priority, such as Border Patrol agents, as priority positions. GAO reviewed data for 13 DHS priority positions across seven components and found that DHS did not meet its average time-to-hire targets in fiscal year 2022 for nine of the 13 positions. Time-to-hire ranges by DHS position, due in part to the different DHS vetting requirements and processes applicable for the position, such as a polygraph or medical exam.

Select Hiring Requirements Applicable to Certain Department of Homeland Security (DHS) Positions



Physical fitness test

Assessment of ability to execute job duties. May include push-ups, sit-ups, and step tests.



Drug test

Assessment to detect the use of illegal drugs and certain prescription drugs.



Medical exam

Assessment of overall health. Includes a medical history review, physician exam, and vision and hearing tests.



Polygraph exam

Assessment of physiological response to a series of background and national security questions.

Source: GAO analysis of requirements applicable to DHS positions; Icons-Studio/stock.adobe.com. | GAO-24-106153

GAO found that components responsible for reporting time-to-hire to DHS do not track time-to-hire from the same starting point—leading to wide variability in its data on hiring times. For example, some begin tracking time-to-hire once applications are received, while others do so when first announcing a job opportunity. Components track from different starting points because some use open continuous announcements and mass hiring models that help fill urgent hiring needs, including for priority positions. Guidance to federal agencies from the Office of Personnel Management (OPM) allows for different hiring approaches. DHS reports this department-wide data to OPM but has not disclosed the variability in how time-to-hire is tracked across components. By clearly disclosing data limitations and associated assumptions it makes when reporting time-to-hire to OPM, DHS could provide more transparent, accurate information on whether it is making timely hiring decisions.

DHS and components identified several challenges in vetting candidates in a timely manner, including ensuring that candidates have completed all position-specific hiring requirements, such as medical exams, obtaining background investigations from previous employers, and verifying that the required candidate paperwork is complete and free of errors. They also shared several practices used to make faster hiring decisions, such as designating certain staff to collect and review candidate paperwork before forwarding it to adjudicators. Although DHS has two working groups at the management level to share practices that help expedite hiring decisions, these groups do not include personnel responsible for implementing hiring and vetting. Although DHS has solicited components to expand participation for one of the working groups, by ensuring that DHS and component personnel tasked with implementing hiring and vetting processes are included in existing working groups and other forums, DHS could better leverage practices across components to make faster hiring decisions.