

Report: FBI's immigration checks too slow

- Story Highlights
- Watchdog agency: Old technology among reasons background checks are delayed
- Checks also are unreliable, Justice Department inspector general says
- FBI blames backlog on increased demands after 2001 terrorist attacks

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WASHINGTON (CNN) -- FBI background checks of potential U.S. immigrants are slow and unreliable, the Justice Department's internal watchdog agency said in a highly critical report Monday.

"The FBI's name check processes are inefficient and untimely, rely on outdated technology and provide little assurance that pertinent and derogatory information is being retrieved and transmitted to customer agencies," said the report by Justice Department Inspector General Glenn Fine.

Fine identified not only old FBI technology but also "limited supervision and training, and inadequate quality control measures" as reasons for the delays.

The bureau's system includes searching paper files in far-flung FBI field offices, adding to backlogs of hundreds of thousands of immigration applications and petitions for citizenship and services.

The FBI said the backlog built up because of additional demands in the wake of the September 11, 2001, attacks.

The Immigration and Naturalization Service asked the FBI "to 're-run' 2.7 million names through a more in-depth name check process following the terrorist attacks of 9/11," said John Miller, the FBI's assistant director for public affairs, in response to the report.

"This unexpected deluge of immigration-related name checks overwhelmed existing resources. ... Corrective actions implemented over several years have improved the [National Name Check Program's] operations, resulting in record numbers of completed name checks and a reduced backlog," Miller said.

By far the FBI's largest customer is the Department of Homeland Security, which is responsible for processing immigration requests. But DHS immigration authorities have

been unable to get prompt responses to many of the clearances they need from the FBI, the department says.

The report acknowledges that a huge rise in DHS requests -- from 2.7 million in 2003 to more than 4 million in fiscal year 2007 -- is partially responsible for the backlog.

The report said 14 percent of the name checks can take from several months to more than a year to complete.

In March, investigators found the FBI had more than 327,000 pending name check requests from the DHS Office of Citizenship and Immigration Services. Ninety percent of the requests were more than 30 days old, and some requests had been pending for more than three years, the report said.

At a briefing for reporters, FBI executive Michael Cannon said the backlog is being reduced sharply this year, and he expects it to be fully eliminated by July 2009.

Immigration lawyers have been especially critical of the FBI, blasting bureaucratic delays and filing lawsuits for government failures to act on immigrant applications.

The inspector general did credit the FBI for its much more efficient fingerprint check system. The report praised the relatively quick work by the FBI division that queries the massive fingerprint repository. The system maintains the largest biometric database in the world, with fingerprints and corresponding criminal history information for more than 50 million subjects.

The FBI scheduled a briefing later Monday to respond to the criticism.

The report is titled "The Federal Bureau of Investigation's Security Check Procedures for Immigration Applications and Petitions."