

Ranking Member Brian Higgins (D-NY) Opening Statement

“The Insider Threat to Homeland Security: Examining Our Nation’s Security Clearance Process”

Wednesday, November 13, 2013 - 311 Cannon House Office Building

This summer, the public became very concerned about surveillance tactics that the National Security Agency currently takes in the interest of security. Former National Security Agency contractor, Edward Snowden, revealed details about National Security Agency surveillance programs that collect phone calls and monitor records of millions of Americans.

This prompted Americans to become very interested in whether the right to privacy trumps the needs of the country. Finding this balance is difficult and according to the director of the National Security Agency, General Keith Alexander, these classified programs have been successful. According to Alexander, people like Snowden who reveal sensitive information about this country can cause grave damage to the nation.

The widespread questions remain, however, how could Snowden have this type of access to national security secrets? Was there anything in his background that showed a lack of integrity? What does it take to get a security clearance?

As Congress and the Executive Branch were searching for answers, a few blocks from the U.S. Capitol, Aaron Alexis, a lone gunman took up arms against fellow employees at the Navy Yard. Alexis, a contractor, not only had a security clearance, but also had a history of arrests and gun infractions. As we have pervasive incidents such as these, it is imperative that we look at the security clearance process.

According to the Office of Personnel Management 4.9 million federal workers and contractors are eligible to hold a security clearance. At the Department of Homeland Security, approximately 124 thousand employees hold clearances.

These vast numbers grow year by year. It lends to the conversation of how these clearances are determined and given. In its report to the Ranking Member of the Full Committee, the Government Accountability Office found that the Office of the Director of National Intelligence has not provided agencies with clearly defined guidance and procedures to determine if a position requires a security clearance.

GAO has also noted that since the 1990s quality in the security clearance investigations has not been a priority. These are just two detrimental flaws in the security clearance process. I am pleased to hear that the Office of Management and Budget is heading a 120 day review of the federal clearance process. However, it seems as if this is a “better late than never” opportunity.

The Intelligence Community has grown greatly since September 11th and there are examples of their outstanding work. In August, the efforts of the Intelligence Community, along with the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, disrupted a terrorist plot in Western New York.

Unfortunately, the lack of consistency and quality in the security clearance process can place the IC in grave danger from an insider threat. We expect quality performance from our federal employees. Holding a security clearance should be a privilege. It is my hope that this hearing can yield solutions that can be included in the restoration of the security clearance process.