



CALL TO SERVE WEBINAR | NOTES ON SECURITY CLEARANCES

AGENCY PARTICIPANTS

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ABOUT BACKGROUND INVESTIGATIONS AND SECURITY CLEARANCES

All government agencies require applicants who receive a job offer to undergo a background investigation. The length and depth of the background investigation will depend on the position's requirements, as well as the type of security clearance that is needed for a particular job or internship. The three types of clearances include Non-Sensitive, Public Trust and National Security.

The investigations for jobs dealing with national security are the most in-depth. These investigations help determine a person's ability and willingness to safeguard classified national security information based on his or her loyalty, character, trustworthiness and reliability.

There are three levels of Security Clearances—Confidential, Secret and Top Secret.

- **Confidential:** This clearance refers to material which, if improperly disclosed, could be reasonably expected to cause some *measurable* damage to national security. It must be reinvestigated every 15 years.
- **Secret:** Unauthorized disclosure of the information this clearance covers could be expected to cause *grave* damage to national security. This level gets reinvestigated every 10 years.
- **Top Secret:** Individuals with this clearance have access to information or material that could be expected to cause *exceptionally grave* damage to national security if it was released without authorization. This level needs to be reinvestigated every five years.

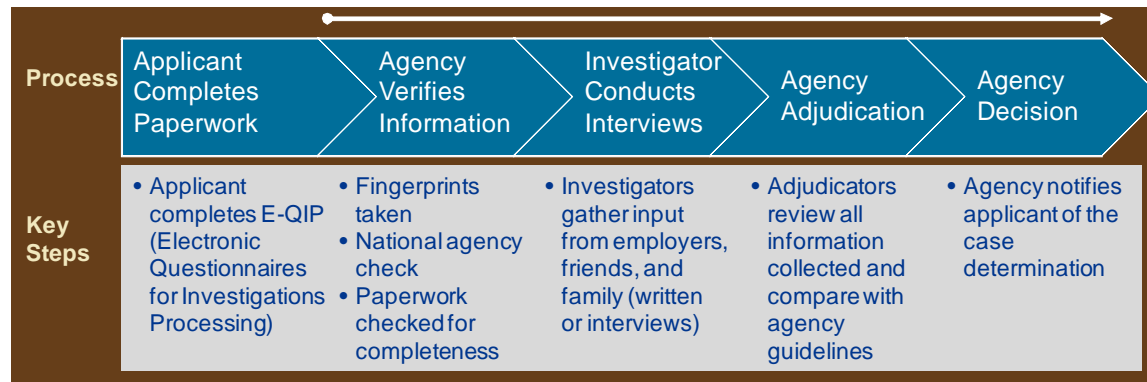
A security clearance is needed for many entry-level positions including those in the Intelligence Community and at the Department of State. The Office of Personnel Management's Federal Investigative Services Division is responsible for the initial background investigation for most security clearances. The final decision of whether or not to grant a security clearance is made by the specific federal agency a candidate will be working for pursuant to the Adjudicative Guidelines for Determining Eligibility for Access to Classified Information.

The elements that make up a background investigation vary depending on the level of clearance that is deemed necessary for a position. In the case of a background investigation for a Top Secret clearance, agents will go out into the field and interview people who have lived or worked with the candidate at some point in the last seven years. Background investigations for lower levels of security clearances are less intense, and generally rely on automated checks of an individual's history. The aspects investigated include the candidate's credit history, criminal background, and employment and education histories.



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INVESTIGATION PROCESS



- According to a recent statement from the Director of the Office of Personnel Management, John Berry, the investigation process has decreased from an average of 120 days to just 37 days.
 - How does the process differ at each agency?
 - Department of State: The Department of State (State) conducts approximately 30,000 security clearances each year. Presidential Executive Orders stipulate how investigations are conducted, and therefore, the process is uniform among federal agencies. State may issue an interim security clearance after performing a preliminary series of investigative steps which will allow an applicant to begin work right away with a conditional offer of employment while an investigation is finalized.
 - Department of Justice: The Department of Justice (DOJ) processes approximately 50,000 security clearances each year. DOJ also conducts investigations according to Presidential Executive Orders. By signing a pre-employment waiver, the DOJ will allow people to start working before the clearance process is complete. DOJ also has a residency requirement meaning that applicants must have lived in the United States for three of the past five years to be considered for employment.
 - Office of Personnel Management: The Office of Personnel Management performs approximately 90 percent, or roughly two million, of the security clearances conducted each year.
- Electronic Questionnaires for Investigations Processing (e-QIP): e-QIP is part of an e-government initiative sponsored by the U.S. Office of Personnel Management. e-QIP allows applicants to electronically enter, update and transmit their personal investigative data over a secure Internet connection to their agency for review and approval.
 - Students may prepare for this in advance, but they cannot initiate it themselves (it can only be initiated by their prospective employer).
 - Typically students have to provide approximately 7-10 years of their employment/life history.
 - For low-risk positions, there is not much information collected meaning that applicants can complete these forms fairly quickly.



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- For higher security clearances, applicants should collect their life, work and travel history; citizenship documentation if born outside of US; and family addresses. If an applicant has been arrested, they will also need to provide detailed information about the incident.
- Applicants can log in and out of e-QIP at will; they do not need to complete all of the forms in one sitting.
- All information entered into e-QIP is secure and in compliance with the Privacy Act.
- When adjudicating a case file, most agencies use a “Whole Person Concept,” which provides an infrastructure for weighing the severity of any misconduct, as well as determining whether or not there will be a detrimental impact to the agency if an applicant works there.

TIPS FROM THE EXPERTS

- Start Early
 - Document work/life history and gather contact information, including addresses, for the last seven to 10 years (based on the type of investigation).
- Document all Foreign Travel and Foreign Contacts
 - A Foreign National is a citizen of a foreign country and should be included as a foreign contact.
 - Contact your security officer about any changes you need to make on the form after submission.
- Submit paperwork in a timely manner. The process for candidates who don't read instructions or omit some forms will be longer. Candidates should reach out to the agency to make sure they aren't missing anything.
- Be Honest!
- Provide References in the US

IMPEDIMENTS

- Dual citizenship or foreign born: This takes extra time as the investigator must verify birth abroad and immigration records. Applicants that are dual citizens or foreign born must articulate their loyalty to the United States and be willing to denounce their foreign citizenship.
- Family members who are from other countries: This can be an impediment in that it takes more time to trace connections in other countries. Key considerations include whether or not family members have connections to a foreign person, group or government that may create a conflict of interest.
- Drug use or criminal record: Students should still apply for federal jobs even if they have used drugs or have a criminal record. However, they need to be honest about their experiences. The agency will consider the individual's age and circumstances when making its decision. Agencies look at these instances differently, and therefore, an applicant may be hired at one agency but not another. For example, there are certain agencies within the DOJ (i.e. DEA and FBI) that have zero tolerance policies for drug use. You can learn more about these disqualification criteria by visiting individual agency Web sites.
- Poor credit or debt: Having a bad credit score can be an impediment to federal employment.



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- Providing incomplete or inaccurate information, or withholding relevant information: Leaving out information will draw out the process. Additionally, missing information will be addressed during the interview.
- Failing to register with the selective service: Selective service registration is required for all males, and failing to do so could act as an impediment to federal employment.

Q&A

- Can mental health counseling be an impediment to obtaining a security clearance? Also, if person has been in treatment, how many years should pass before they apply for a job requiring a security clearance?
 - The Department of State has an in-house medical office that reviews each applicant's medical history. All medical information is private. Seeking medications to handle life stress is often viewed as a positive factor. There is greater concern when the applicant does not realize he or she has a problem and is not addressing the issue accordingly. If the treatment does not impact the individual's judgment, then it is not likely to act as a hindrance when seeking to obtain a security clearance or public trust certification.
 - Alcohol abuse must also be reported, and successful treatment will be considered as a mitigating factor. Therefore, it is not necessarily a disqualifier. For some positions this will not come up during the review.
- What happens if a person goes through the security clearance process, but is not hired?
 - The information is retained by the agency for 16 years. It is helpful for a person to reuse this information if they reapply for a federal job.
- Who pays for the investigation?
 - The agency pays for the investigation; there is no cost to the applicant.
- Is the process different for someone who is a new citizen?
 - New citizens will go through the same process, however, it may take longer for them to receive a clearance.
- When might a student start this process?
 - While a student can begin collecting relevant information, he or she cannot request that an investigation be conducted. It must be the employer who makes the request.
- If an applicant is denied a clearance, will he or she find out why?
 - Yes, the applicant will be informed of the rationale, and he or she will have the opportunity to respond to it.
- Can clearances be transferred from one agency to another?
 - Each agency will review the clearance paperwork to determine if the background investigation meets its standards. In most cases, having a security clearance in one agency helps to expedite the process in another through the recognition of reciprocity.
- Why do students have to complete the security clearance process for internships?
 - Obtaining a security clearance is not about how long a person is employed with the federal government. The reasons for having a security clearance are about the kind of information a person can access during their period of employment, however long it may be.