



Homeland insecurities: Lost guns, backlogged asylum-seekers among DHS vulnerabilities

Donovan Slack

November 7, 2017

The Department of Homeland Security has key vulnerabilities in administration and oversight that could leave the agency open to fraud and pose threats to national security and public safety, according to a series of reports issued in recent weeks by the department's inspector general.

The problems range from miscommunications on immigration to oversight failures at the Federal Emergency Management Agency and a skyrocketing backlog of asylum applications that could present a "significant risk to national security and public safety," the inspector general found.

The issues show just how steep the challenges are for President Trump's pick to lead the agency, Kirstjen Nielsen, who is facing a Senate confirmation hearing Wednesday.

The 15-year-old agency, created to help keep Americans safe after the 9/11 terrorist attacks, has a broad mission guarding the nation's ports, borders and airports and overseeing federal disaster response and recovery.

Nielsen is an attorney with homeland security and cybersecurity experience who was chief of staff to Gen. John Kelly at DHS before he became White House chief of staff. She followed him to the White House, where she is principal deputy chief of staff.

Previously, she worked at the Transportation Security Administration and on the White House Homeland Security Council under President George W. Bush.

Here are some of the key vulnerabilities identified by the DHS inspector general — and issues she faces if confirmed.

Asylum backlog

A backlog of asylum applications has skyrocketed in recent years, jumping from roughly 57,000 in 2014 to more than 250,000 this year.

Immigrants who are already in the United States can seek asylum by filing an application with U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, which then reviews them and sets up fingerprinting, background checks and interviews before asylum can be granted.

The inspector general did not indicate where in the process the backlogged applications are, but the IG's office told USA TODAY that USCIS officials indicated they had only received initial, preliminary vetting.

“These cases present a significant risk to national security and public safety when not vetting the applicants’ backgrounds,” the inspector general concluded.

Eliminating the backlog without added staffing or policy changes could take years, and in the meantime, the inspector general said, USCIS officials have identified fraud trends in the program.

“Individuals may file for affirmative asylum, anticipating a prolonged waiting period, as a means of exploiting the application process to obtain an Employment Authorization Document,” the inspector general said.

Last year, the department implemented an “asylum surge issue team” to help improve processing, but the inspector general found “no meaningful changes implemented.”

Immigration miscommunications

DHS does not foster enough coordination between its offices responsible for immigration administration and enforcement, which has led to miscommunications and breakdowns, the inspector general found.

The inspector general identified issues with bed space availability, inmate transfer responsibility, language services and processing of undocumented immigrants because of different decisions made by U.S. Customs and Border Protection, U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement and U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services.

CBP apprehends immigrants but relies on ICE to house them, yet ICE didn’t consistently notify CPB if and where beds were available. In addition, while CBP is a 24-hour, seven-day operation, ICE enforcement and removal staff normally don’t work nights and weekends, leaving customs and border workers scrambling to house detainees.

A decision by USCIS last year to stop conducting interviews with individuals not currently detained at one location prompted ICE to convert nearly 2,000 cases pending asylum hearings to notices to appear in court. An ICE official said they likely would have been removed and not released into communities if their cases had been adjudicated upon entry to the United States.

ICE officials also didn’t always communicate with USCIS when they moved or released detainees, so USCIS at times showed up at facilities to do interviews but the subjects were not there.

“Lack of coordination in processing aliens creates potential vulnerabilities to national security and public safety,” the inspector general found.

In response to the report issued last week, department officials said they planned to establish a policy council with members from ICE, USCIS, CBP, and other offices to coordinate department-wide administration of immigration policies.

Hundreds of guns, badges lost

Between 2014 and 2016, DHS personnel lost thousands of sensitive assets including guns, badges and secure immigration stamps, the inspector general found.

Border patrol, ICE agents and TSA officers are among DHS personnel who carry guns and badges that pose a security risk if they are lost or stolen. A total of 228 guns and nearly 1,900 badges went missing during the two-year period.

The IG cited instances where two off-duty ICE officers left guns in backpacks while on a beach in Puerto Rico, and another left his gun and badge unsecured in a hotel room while on vacation.

A CBP officer left his badge in an unlocked public gym locker, another left his gun in a bag at a friend's house, and a third left his gun in an unlocked car overnight. A TSA officer left his gun in his car while he had dinner with his family.

All were stolen.

Only a fraction of the officers were disciplined and none received remedial training on safeguarding such sensitive assets in the future.

In three cases, the inspector general found, weapons fell into the hands of convicted felons.

"Police recovered one firearm from an individual in possession of heroin; another from a suspect charged with armed robbery; and the last from a convicted felon at a pawn shop," the IG wrote.

DHS officials said they concurred with the findings and plan to update policies, training and inventory control for guns and badges.

Marshaling better aviation security

The contribution to aviation security of the Federal Air Marshal Service is "questionable," the inspector general concluded.

The details of the findings are classified but an unclassified summary said investigators made five recommendations for improvement. "We also identified a part of FAMS operations where, if discontinued, funds could be put to better use," the summary states.

Part of the Transportation Security Administration, the service deploys marshals on commercial flights to "protect airline passengers and crew against the risk of criminal and terrorist violence."

But critics contend that there are only enough marshals to cover 5 percent of flights, and yet the program accounts for 10 percent of the TSA's budget, costing more than \$800 million per year.

"In general, spending one dollar on the service generates less than 10 cents in benefit," wrote John Mueller, a political scientist at the Cato Institute and Ohio State University, and Mark Stewart, a civil engineer and risk analyst at the University of Newcastle in Australia.

Mueller told USA TODAY he believes they are virtually useless.

"They do nothing," Mueller told USA TODAY in an interview. "They may have helped with a few drunks here and there. They've apprehended nobody."

Mueller and Stewart, co-authors of *Are we safe enough? Measuring and assessing aviation security*, maintain that slashing the marshal service's budget by 75%, increasing training and arming of pilots and installing secondary barriers to cockpits would produce "better aviation security and a savings of hundreds of millions of dollars each year."

Disastrous loan oversight

In a separate report released last month, the inspector general found that FEMA “did not manage disaster relief grants and funds adequately and did not hold grant recipients accountable for properly managing disaster relief funds.”

Between 2009 and 2015, the inspector general identified \$1.6 billion in questionable costs. Last year, the watchdog found another \$155 million.

They included instances where projects did not qualify or grant recipients did not ensure full and open competition for work under the grants, did not provide opportunities to small, women- or minority-owned business and used prohibited cost-inflated contracts.

FEMA provides grants to state and local governments and nonprofit organizations to help response and recovery from major disasters.

The inspector general also audited the agency’s initial response to major disasters and found the responses were effective but noted “FEMA’s management responsibility merely begins with the initial disaster response.”

In response to the report, FEMA officials said they are committed to addressing the findings and the agency is working to advance consistent, FEMA-wide guidance for grant management and compliance.