STATE OF THE SECURITY CLEARANCE PROCESS

2H 2023

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A letter from our President and Founder, Evan Lesser

Security clearances are once again making national news headlines. The good news? More interest and energy around personnel vetting and the security clearance process. The bad news? More bad ideas and uninformed opinions about how best to improve that process.

From former president Donald Trump's alleged troves of classified information in Mar-a-Lago to Airman Jake Teixeira's alleged leaks of classified information to gamer friends in a chat room, there is new scrutiny into who has access to what. Unfortunately, many of the public discussions are about the vetting process and number of individuals with access – and not on better protecting the documents in the first place. The reforms created around Trusted Workforce 2.0 have been buried beneath new criticism of the clearance process. All amidst a national security hiring market that remains challenging.

Security clearance processing times continue to tick up slightly, despite newly announced 'moonshot' goals from the Office of Management and Budget. The time it takes to onboard cleared personnel remains a significant obstacle preventing individuals from pursuing national security careers. The limited, and in many agencies decreasing, cleared talent pool remains a significant obstacle for contractors looking to fill positions.

Evan Lesser

President and Founder of ClearanceJobs

🐿️ SHRINKING PURPLE SQUIRREL

Desk audits and efforts to decrease the number of positions requiring access to classified information have already begun. Reductions in clearances come as the government continues to face a hiring crunch and graying workforce. Just 7% of full time government employees are under 30, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics. The government continues to struggle to attract and retain workers and faces challenges in clearing them.

The 2H 2023 State of the Security Clearance Process continues to provide actionable insights into the state of the security clearance process today.
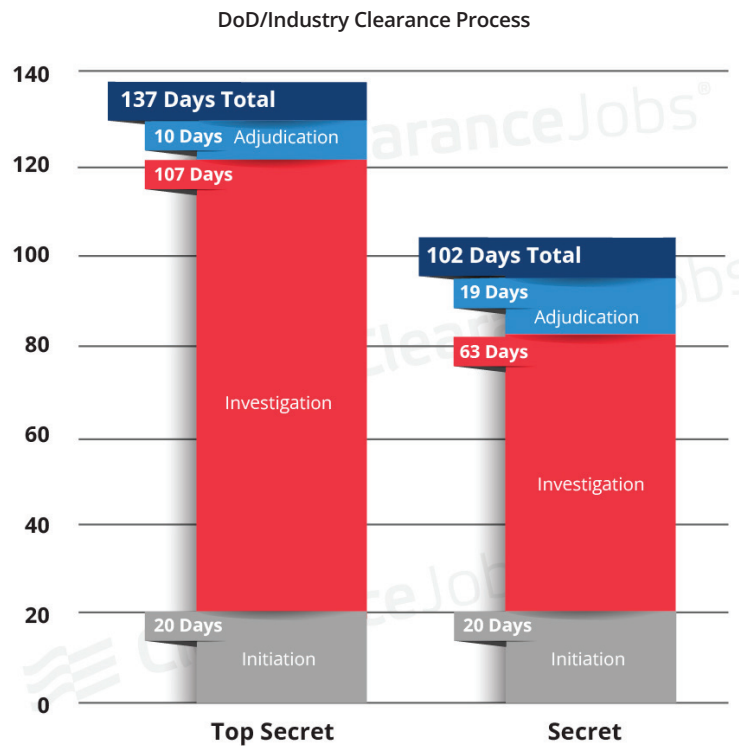
SECURITY CLEARANCE INSECURITY

After years of improvements in the vetting and personnel security process, several high-profile breaches and cleared incidents seemed to shake up confidence in the background investigation process and cause many to point figures to a broken system. Most detrimental to those in the national security hiring space are calls to reduce the size of the cleared workforce, or overhaul vetting in a way that would exacerbate processing delays.
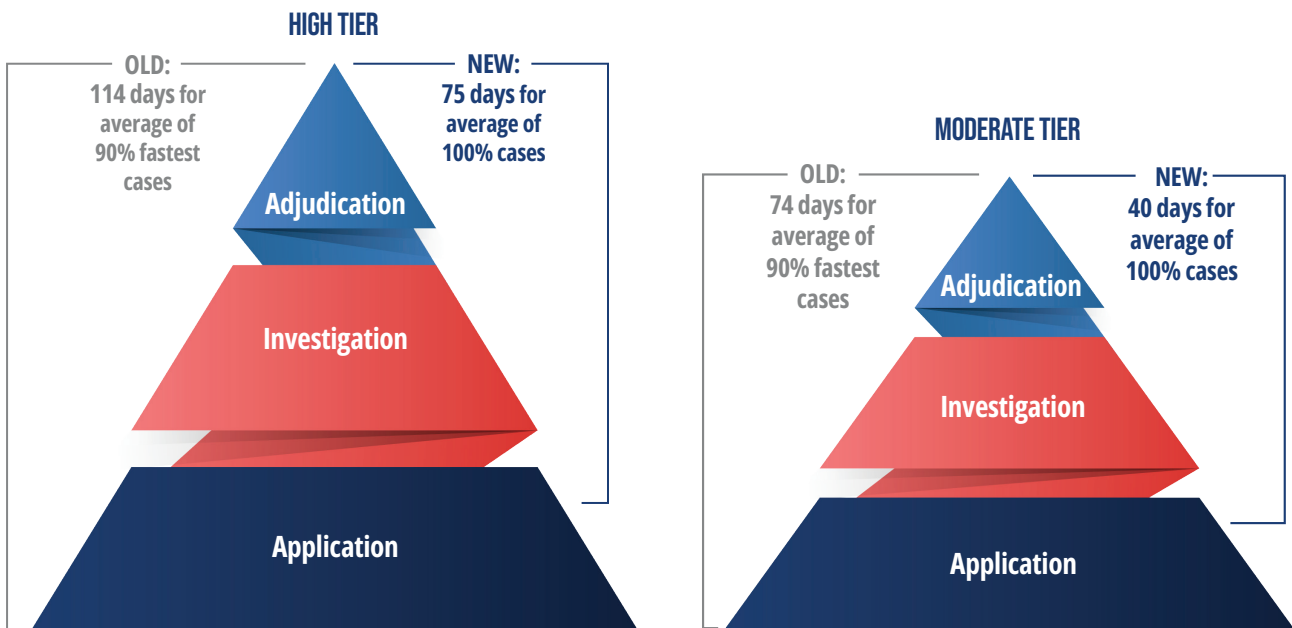
ANNOUNCING UPDATED BENCHMARKS

A March hearing of the U.S. Senate Select Committee on Intelligence (SSCI) featured two key announcements when it comes to security clearance reporting timelines – new aggressive goals for security clearance processing, and the move to announce metrics for the full cleared population, and not just the fastest 90% of cases.

How long it takes to obtain a DoD/Industry Security Clearance

DoD/Industry Clearance Process

Top Secret
- 137 Days Total
- 10 Days Adjudication
- 107 Days Investigation
- 20 Days Initiation

Secret
- 102 Days Total
- 19 Days Adjudication
- 63 Days Investigation
- 20 Days Initiation

Source: FY 23 Q2 NISPPAC Update

"Targets are important both from the external communication of what do we expect to achieve them with all of the set different pieces of activity that is underway, and it's really important from an internal management standpoint in terms of - what are the changes that we need to make to our processes - and it's actually very hard to prioritize unless we have a finish line in mind," said Jason Miller, Deputy Director of the Office of Management and Budget and chair of the Performance Accountability Council.

HIGH TIER

OLD: 114 days for average of 90% fastest cases

NEW: 75 days for average of 100% cases

- Adjudication
- Investigation
- Application

MODERATE TIER

OLD: 74 days for average of 90% fastest cases

NEW: 40 days for average of 100% cases

- Adjudication
- Investigation
- Application

DoD National Security Population Eligibility & Access

Personnel (In Thousands)

Quarter	Eligible - In Access	Eligible - No Access	Total
FY21 Q1	2518	1335	3853
FY21 Q2	1962	2342	4404
FY21 Q3	2160	2300	4460
FY21 Q4	2229	2372	4601
FY22 Q1	2206	2457	4663
FY22 Q2	2196	2538	4734
FY22 Q3	2161	2641	4802
FY22 Q4	2173	2695	4868
FY23 Q1	2182	2748	4930
FY23 Q2	2205	2802	5007
FY23 Q3	2228	2856	5084

■ Eligible - In Access   ■ Eligible - No Access
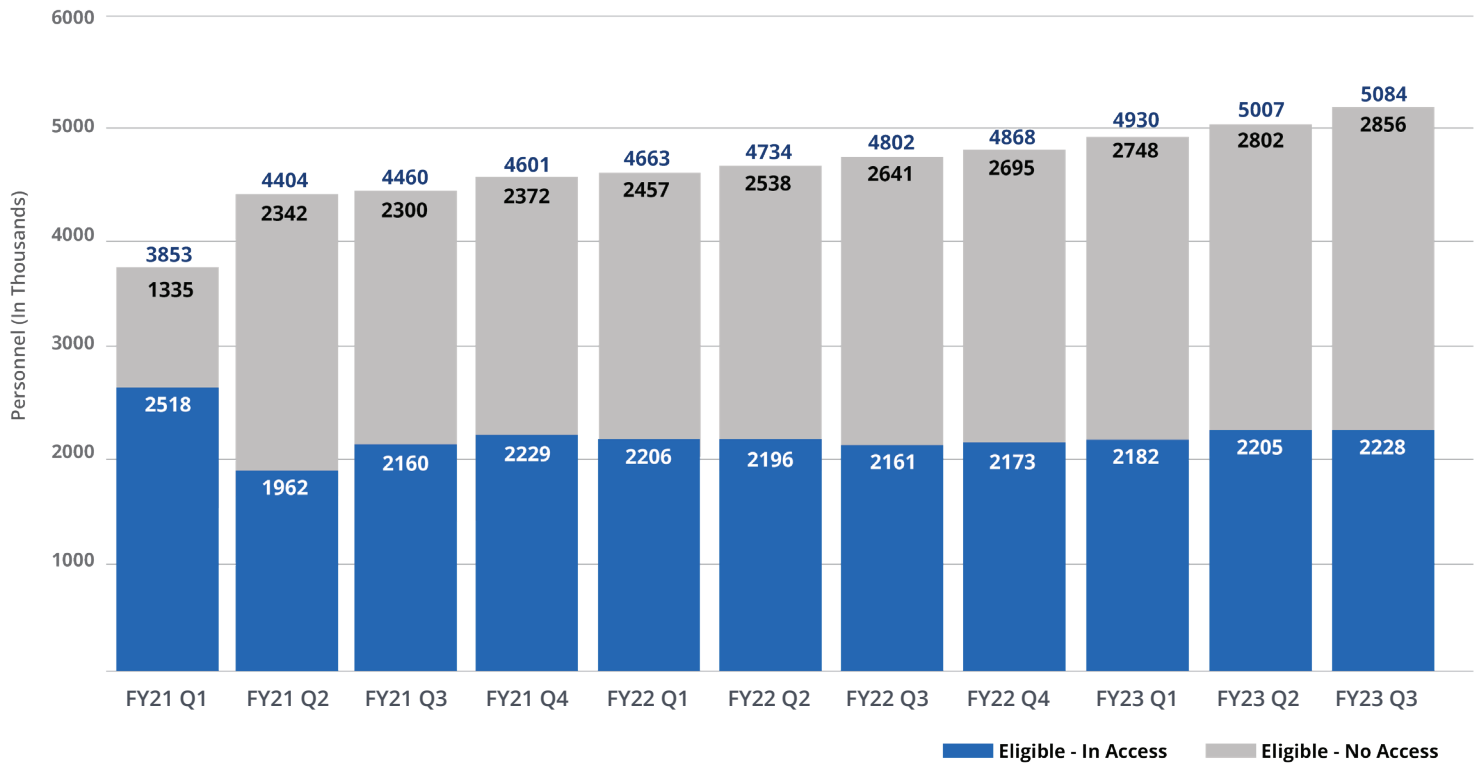
The overall number of individuals with a DoD clearance continues to increase, according to data released by the Security, Suitability, and Credentialing Performance Advisability Council. The total DoD security clearance population has ticked up above 5 million. But the in-access population still sits at less than half of that figure – 2.2 million. And that's still 300,000 fewer than it was just two years ago in FY 2021. As the Senate pushes for a decrease in the security clearance population, we may see that number drop further.

With security clearance processing times increasing, and the transition to a new security clearance application process, it's more important than ever for applicants to complete their applications correctly. Average rejection rates are just 2-3%, but every rejection is an application delayed. DCSA provides the top reasons for applications to be rejected:

SF-86 Rejection Reasons

Reason	Percentage
Required forms not signed, dated or submitted	48.3%
Subject background information missing or discrepant	41.4%
Subject identifying data missing or discrepant	8.4%
Other	1.5%
Submitted forms outdated	0.4%
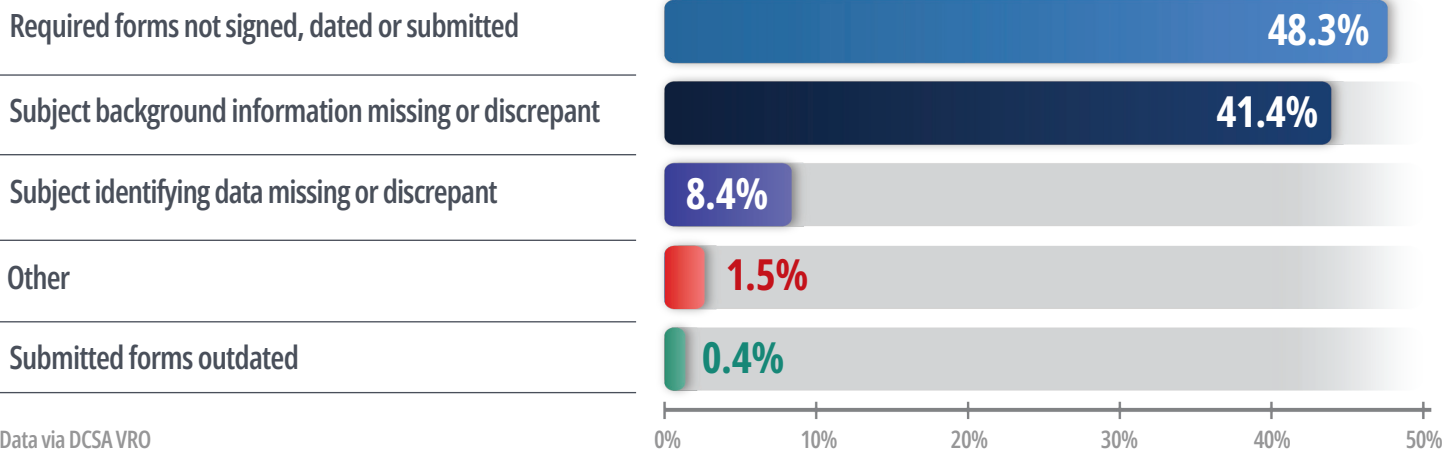
Data via DCSA VRO

ClearanceJobs®

"The number of people with a security clearance is crazy"

"We've got **too many people** with access to a system that is **devoid of accountability** and has grown increasingly byzantine, bureaucratic, and outmoded."

"They're giving out security clearances like candy."

SECURITY CLEARANCE LEGISLATIVE SPOTLIGHT

Security clearance reform is an ongoing process, with both the Intelligence Authorization Act (IAA) and National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) outlining provisions that prioritize efforts including topics like improving security clearance processing times, requiring additional oversight, metrics, and reporting, and reform efforts around controversial topics like the polygraph.
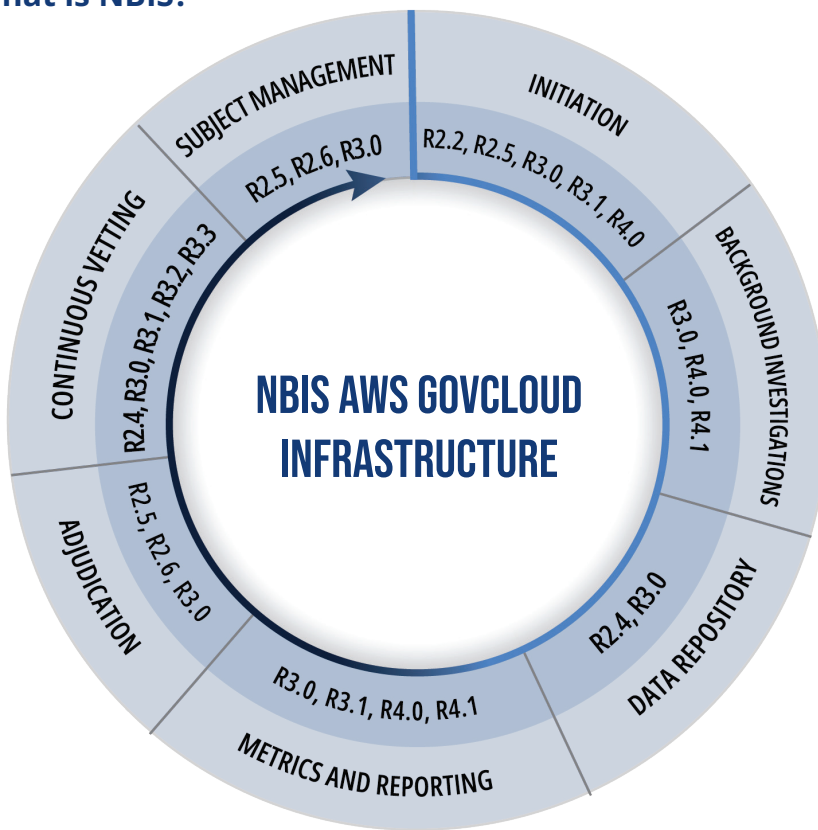
Congressional interest in security clearance reform picked up steam when security breaches by former president Donald Trump led to an FBI raid and criminal charges. After Massachusetts Airman Jake Teixeira was arrested for alleged leaks of classified information online, two separate bills were announced, the Sensible Classification Act and the Classification Reform Act of 2023. The bills include legislation to limit how long information can be classified, strengthen insider threat programs, and mandating a review of president and vice presidential documents. The Classification Reform Act calls for the Office of the Director of National Intelligence (ODNI) to take on the role of Executive Agent for classification and declassification. Section 9 of the Sensible Classification Act also asks agencies to make efforts to reduce the overall number of individuals with access to classified information.

Both bills have yet to be signed into law, but they signal the direction congress is taking as it looks to overhaul the security clearance process, and those working in and around the community should expect more changes coming from congress in the year to come.

NBIS AND EAPP MOVING FORWARD

2023 is the year the National Background Investigation Services (NBIS) and the eApp security clearance application truly come alive. Both have been discussed – and in the works – for years. But this year they are the major muscle movements affecting every part of the security clearance process – enabling Trusted Workforce 2.0 reforms and empowering a better applicant experience.
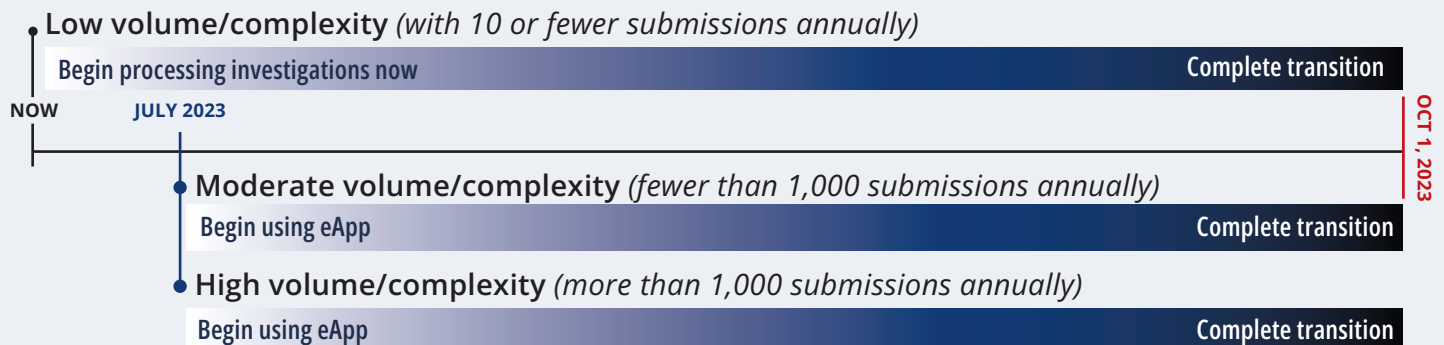
What is NBIS?

NBIS AWS GOVCLOUD INFRASTRUCTURE

- SUBJECT MANAGEMENT — R2.5, R2.6, R3.0
- INITIATION — R2.2, R2.5, R3.0, R3.1, R4.0
- BACKGROUND INVESTIGATIONS — R3.0, R4.0, R4.1
- DATA REPOSITORY — R2.4, R3.0
- METRICS AND REPORTING — R3.0, R3.1, R4.0, R4.1
- ADJUDICATION — R2.5, R2.6, R3.0
- CONTINUOUS VETTING — R2.4, R3.0, R3.1, R3.2, R3.3

NBIS Functionality

- » Position Designation
- » Electronic capture of applicant/agency information
- » Information Management (IM) support
- » Fingerprint transmittal abilities
- » Field work capability
- » Background investigation validation
- » Automated record checks
- » Investigation research support
- » Investigation case management capability
- » Reporting
- » CE/CV High-side interface, CDS, Case Management

A May 5 memo from DCSA outlined the NBIS transition timeline based on the number of cases initiated.

Low volume/complexity *(with 10 or fewer submissions annually)*

Begin processing investigations now — Complete transition

NOW | JULY 2023 | OCT 1, 2023

Moderate volume/complexity *(fewer than 1,000 submissions annually)*

Begin using eApp — Complete transition

High volume/complexity *(more than 1,000 submissions annually)*

Begin using eApp — Complete transition

DISS/NBIS SWIVEL CHAIR ACTIVITIES

By October, eApp will completely replace eQIP as the onboarding method for new cleared talent. And that's good news. As an application process, eApp is leaps and bounds beyond what eQIP offered.

eApp

- Provision User
- Subject Search
- Create Subject
- Edit Subject *(As needed)*
- Affiliate Subject
- Initiate Investigation Request
- Review
- Submit

DISS

- Subject Search
- Create Subject
- Edit Subject *(As needed)*
- Affiliate Subject
- Fingerprint

CONTINUOUS VETTING, SEAD 3, AND SELF-REPORTING

With all security clearance holders now enrolled in continuous vetting, the need for self-reporting has taken the spotlight. Just because the government now gets automated alerts for issues like a DUI or a delinquent account doesn't mean security clearance holders are exempt from reporting these issues. In fact, failure to do so can cause a personal conduct security clearance issue. When in doubt, security clearance holders should at the least create a paper trail verifying that they reported an issue to their security officer.

> **You still need to submit a fresh SF-86 every five years, even under CV.**
> The good news is eApp and NBIS should help make that process easier.

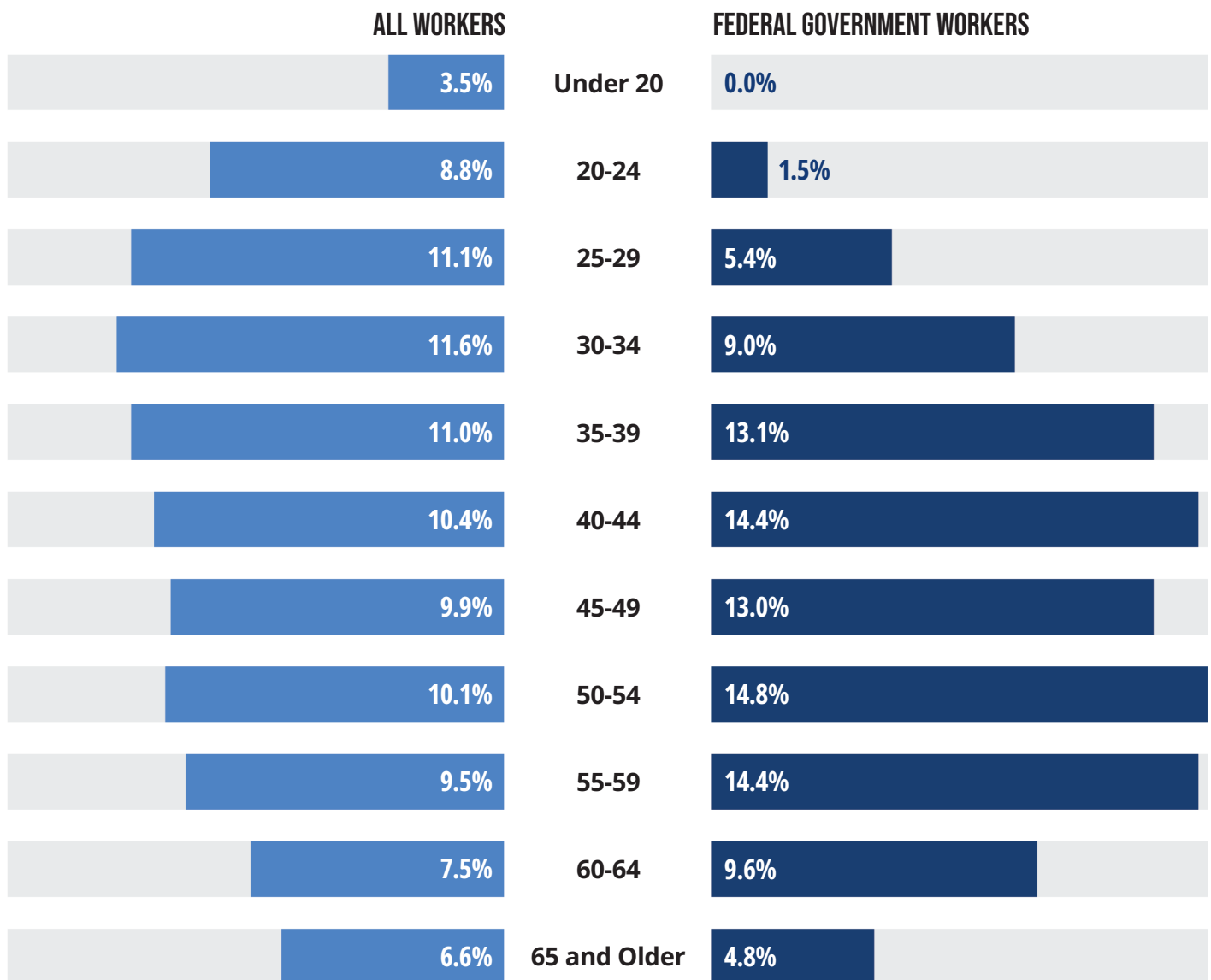| Reporting Actions Required	All	Top Secret
Foreign Contacts - OFFICIAL	Refers to ISL2021-02	Refers to ISL2021-02
Foreign Contacts - UNOFFICIAL	CSR	CSR
Behavior & Conduct	Incident CSR	Incident CSR
Foreign Affiliate	Incident CSR	Incident CSR
Media Contact	Incident CSR	Incident CSR
Criminal Activity	Incident CSR	Incident CSR
Treatment and Counseling	Incident CSR	Incident CSR
Personal Finance & Business Interest	Incident CSR	Incident CSR
Living Status/Arrangements	N/A	CSR
Foreign Travel - UNOFFICIAL	Foreign Travel Module	Foreign Travel Module
Foreign Travel - OFFICIAL	N/A	N/A

*CSR = Change in Status Request

BOOMERS VS. ZOOMERS AND THE NEED FOR CLEARED TALENT

The federal workforce is aging. Many government career opportunities require levels of experience that don't align with the reality of an entry-level worker. And many of the most in-demand positions in the federal government today also require some form of a security clearance – and as those times continue to creep up and more agencies crack down on their overall numbers, what is already a tight pool looks to only be getting tighter.

You may be able to attract them – but can you keep them engaged through a six-month to one-year hiring process? That's an ongoing issue, and one where the security clearance process takes center stage. eApp can help – but if overall security clearance processing times don't improve, it will still be difficult to onboard enough talent to keep pace with openings.

The federal government workforce against the general U.S. workforce

ALL WORKERS		FEDERAL GOVERNMENT WORKERS
3.5%	Under 20	0.0%
8.8%	20-24	1.5%
11.1%	25-29	5.4%
11.6%	30-34	9.0%
11.0%	35-39	13.1%
10.4%	40-44	14.4%
9.9%	45-49	13.0%
10.1%	50-54	14.8%
9.5%	55-59	14.4%
7.5%	60-64	9.6%
6.6%	65 and Older	4.8%

Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, U.S. Office of Personnel Management

AVERAGE TIME TO HIRE

Private Sector — 36 Days

Federal Government — 98 Days

Current Top Secret clearance processing times — 137 Days
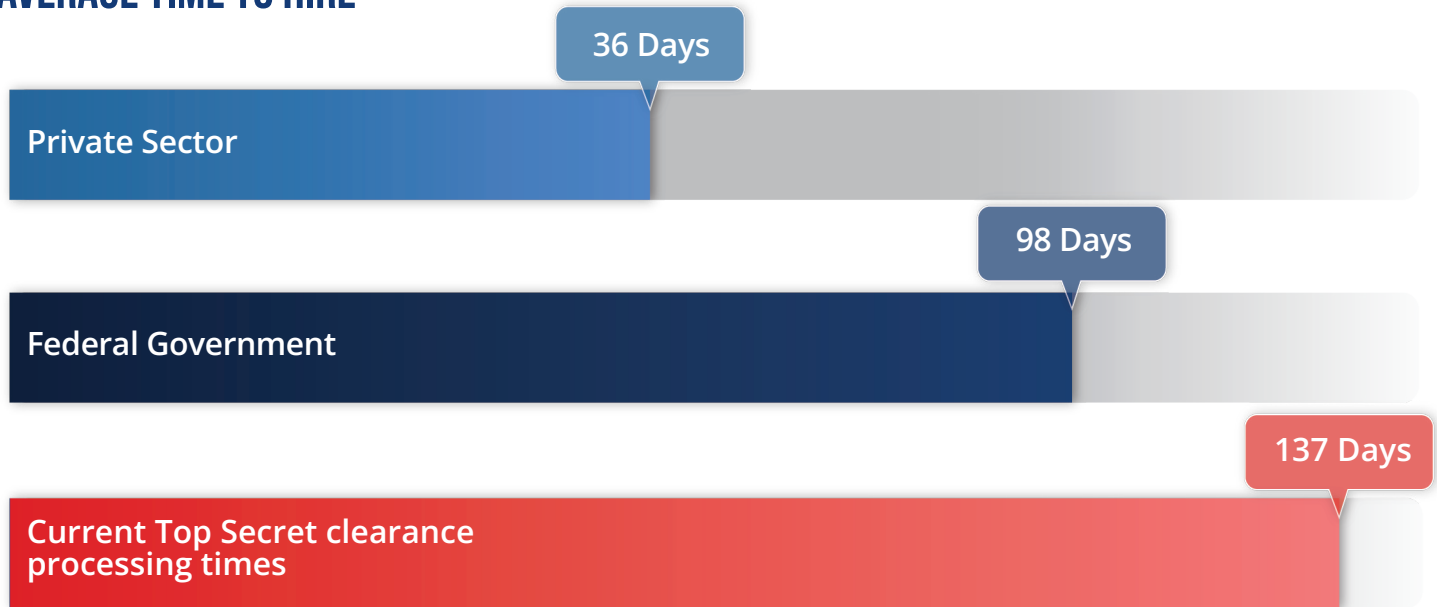
FAQ

HAVE MORE QUESTIONS ABOUT THE SECURITY CLEARANCE PROCESS?
VISIT OUR SECURITY CLEARANCE FAQ.

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END-TO-END CLEARED HIRING SOLUTIONS

RECRUITMENT SOLUTION ↗

- Search, directly engage, and easily work cleared candidates through a pipeline.
- Convert passives to active potential hires.

CAREER EVENTS ↗

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- Choose from in-person or virtual, public or private events.

SOURCING SERVICES ↗

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- All that's left for you to do is interview and hire.

EMPLOYER BRANDING ↗

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- Amplify your hiring messages using targeted messaging, site advertising and sponsored content.

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