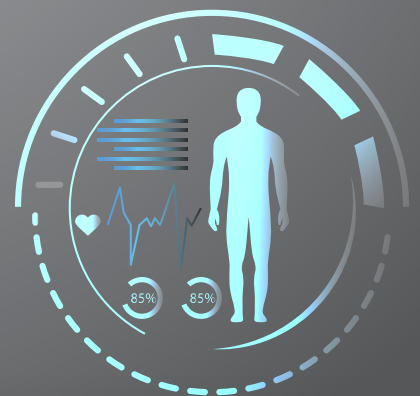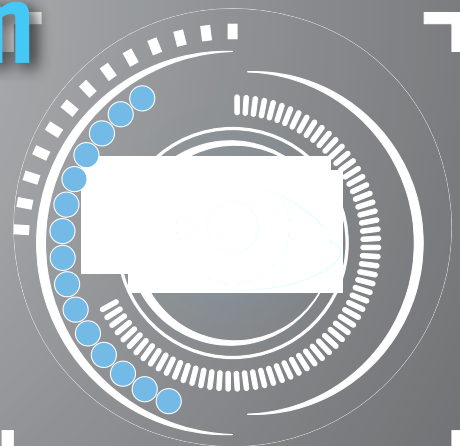# Modernizing the 21st Century Workforce by Fixing the Security Clearance System

by Mark R. Warner
Senator (D-VA), Vice Chairman of the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence

At a hearing in the Senate Intelligence Committee earlier this year, Director of National Intelligence Dan Coats called the security clearance system "broken." That statement followed an announcement by the Government Accountability Office that the personnel security clearance process is back on its "high risk" list, reaffirming what the national security community has known for the last several years: the system must be reformed.

Our current security clearance process was born in 1947, back when classified documents were on paper and Telex. Today we have a mixed workforce of government and contractors, working in a cyber-environment where terabytes of data can be removed on an external hard drive or shared through the cloud with the touch of a button.

With the multitude of national security threats facing our nation – from Russia and North Korea to extremism and climate change –it is a critical issue that we ignore at our peril.

There is no question that the threats to our security are real, and people must be vetted to have access to our nation's most sensitive facilities, networks and information.

But we have seen multiple examples of how failures of the security clearance system put our country at risk: insider threats like Edward Snowden and Harold Martin put petabytes of classified data into the hands of those who would do us harm.

We have also seen multiple security lapses like the Navy Yard and Ft. Hood shootings where more rigorous ongoing screening of our personnel might have averted tragedy.

At the same time, the backlog at the National Background Investigations Bureau has swelled, undermining our ability to deploy the right people to solve our greatest security challenges.

It's clear that the current system is simply too time-consuming, too expensive and too complex. And it hurts government agencies and our industry partners alike.

The clearance backlog and continued difficulty of transferring a security clearance between federal agencies cost taxpayers millions, as intelligence and national security professionals must twiddle their thumbs for months after they are hired waiting for their clearance to come through. Too often, recently-vetted staff must start the process from scratch if they move to a job with a different agency or on a different contract.

Because many agencies and the companies that support them are located in my home state of Virginia, I've seen firsthand how these inefficiencies impact government personnel and contractors alike, undermining our ability to attract quality talent and field a reliable and trusted workforce in a timely manner.

I've also heard directly from national security professionals on the front lines about how we can fix our broken clearance system. Some issues can be improved with just a little bit of common sense: in the digital age, do we still need to conduct in-person interviews of an applicant's neighbor? Can we continuously evaluate people's trustworthiness rather than conducting a full reinvestigation every five or ten years? Are there better ways to anticipate who may become a security risk beyond simply having foreign relatives or living overseas?

The executive branch, for its part, has created new councils, agencies and policies. We have been patiently waiting for a new executive order that would consolidate the National Background Investigations Bureau at the Department of Defense and for the rollout of the administration's Trusted Workforce 2.0 initiative to adopt policy changes.

As Vice Chairman of the Senate Intelligence Committee, I believe our committee has an important part to play, given our role in ensuring proper protections for our nation's most sensitive information.

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I am hopeful the Congress will be able to pass an Intelligence Authorization Act before it recesses that has an entire section dedicated to clearance reform. This would hold the executive branch accountable, help them foster innovation, and enact commonsense reforms. I recently introduced these measures as separate legislation to reinforce its importance.

We face a unique opportunity to radically improve how we recruit and vet personnel to support sensitive government missions. And while the threats and challenges to the national security workforce are palpable, technology can allow us to gather information about individuals applying for access to our nation's secrets much more readily, while still respecting their privacy. We must capitalize on this moment to address the structural problems that are so evident and bring personnel vetting into the 21st century.

We must come together across branches of government and party lines, in collaboration with our industry partners, to address these very difficult challenges. We need a focused leadership to commit the time, political capital, and yes, the funding necessary to finally modernize our nation's security clearance process.

But to get to the finish line, it will require more than a restating of the problem. We need action. I, for one, am ready to do my part. ■