



U.S. Department of Agriculture
Personnel Security Bulletin #02-05
Subject: Issuance of Brochure: *Answers to Questions*
Concerning Personnel Security Background Investigations

United States
Department of
Agriculture

Subject: Issuance of a Brochure Entitled: *Answers to Questions*
Concerning Personnel Security Background Investigations

Office of the
Assistant Secretary
For Administration

Issue: With the recent emphasis within USDA on personnel security, there has been an increase in the number of USDA employees being subjected to rigorous background investigations for both national security and public trust positions. Many of these employees have not previously been subjected to rigorous background investigations. As a result, these employees have many questions regarding the process of conducting background investigations.

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Date Issued: September 1, 2002

Effective Date: September 1, 2002

Scope and Effect: This is an internal advisory document for use by USDA personnel involved in implementing USDA's personnel security program

Supersession: This Bulletin does not supercede any previous guidance issued.

New Procedure: Effective immediately, USDA agencies and staff offices are encouraged to distribute the attached brochure which explains why and how background investigations are conducted.

A web version and a Microsoft Word® version of the brochure are available on the [USDA Personnel Security Web Page](#). From this web site the document can be downloaded and printed.

Except to this Procedure: No exceptions are necessary since this is an option being afforded to those who wish to avail themselves of it.

Background: The number of background investigations performed on USDA employees has grown significantly over the last year. Many USDA employees are, for the first time, having background investigation conducted. As a result, employees have contacted personnel security staff in Department Administration (DA) and throughout the mission areas with questions concerning how and why background investigations are being conducted.

DA, in cooperation with OPM, developed this brochure in an attempt to answer the most common questions that have been asked. The distribution of this brochure will help minimize the amount of the time personnel security staff need to spend answering routine questions and will also assist in ensuring that consistent answers are given to these questions throughout USDA.

Further Information: For further information, please contact OCPM's Personnel Security Division at 202 720-7373.

ANSWERS TO QUESTIONS CONCERNING PERSONNEL SECURITY BACKGROUND INVESTIGATIONS

United States Department of Agriculture

September 2002

Issued by

Personnel Security Division
Office of Crisis Planning and Management
Departmental Administration

"In today's times, there can be no question of the need for accurate, complete, timely and relevant background investigations of those whom the American people entrust to perform important public service functions. The safety of our employees, our families and our country is ultimately at stake, and we can have no greater priority."

Kay Coles James
Director,
U.S. Office of Personnel Management

Q. Why are you going to investigate me? I'm only applying for an entry-level job and I don't need a security clearance.

A. The interests of the national security require that all persons privileged to be employed in the departments and agencies of the government shall be reliable, trustworthy, of good conduct and character, and of complete and unswerving loyalty to the United States. This means that the appointment of each civilian employee in any department or agency of the government is subject to investigation. The scope of the investigation will vary, depending on the nature of the position and the degree of harm that an individual in that position could cause.

The requirement to be investigated applies whether or not the position requires a security clearance (in order to have access to classified national security information).

Q. Do I have to answer all the questions on the form? A lot of that information is already on my resume.

A. Yes. The resume is part of the application process. The Security Questionnaire is part of the investigation process. All of the questions should be answered fully, accurately, and honestly.

Q. What will happen if I refuse to give you some of this personal information?

A. The investigation is a job requirement. Providing the information is voluntary, but if you choose not to provide the required information, you will not meet the requirements of the job and will therefore not be considered further. If you are already employed by the Federal government, your appointment will be terminated. The courts have upheld this principle.

Q. What should I do if I remember something later, after I've filled out the form and turned it in?

A. Immediately notify the security officials to whom you submitted the questionnaire.

Q. I don't want everybody reading my personal information; who gets to see this form?

A. The only persons authorized to see your personal information are Personnel Security, Suitability, and Investigations professionals who have been investigated at the appropriate level and who have a genuine and demonstrated need for access to the information.

Q. I'm not a criminal; why do you want my fingerprints?

A. So that we can verify your claim that you're not a criminal by checking the FBI's fingerprint files. And, Executive Orders require that all Federal employees be fingerprinted.

Q. My brother works for one of the largest companies in the world, but he didn't have to go through all this; why should I?

A. The rules, regulations, laws, and orders governing the hiring and retention of Federal employees are specific. There is no requirement for private employers to use the same guidelines as public employers. Of course, if your brother's job with the private employer required him to have access to classified national security information as a contractor to the Federal government, even your brother would have to be investigated.

Q. Are you going to interview people other than those I name on the questionnaire? If so, why?

A. Background Investigators are required to identify, locate, and interview a sufficient number of people who know you well. We want a balanced and unbiased investigation; it would be a questionable investigative practice to only interview persons whom the individual being investigated identified for us.

Q. Is it okay if I guess at dates and addresses that I barely remember?

A. Providing information that is as complete and accurate as possible will assure that your investigation is completed in an efficient and timely manner. If you give us approximate information, note that on the questionnaire and, if you're interviewed in person, point out the approximated information on the questionnaire to the Investigator.

Q. Why do you need information about my relatives?

A. Relatives can potentially influence your actions. We need to determine if you could be exploited by threats or pressure against your relatives or if they themselves could exert pressure against you.

Q. Will I get a chance to explain some of the answers I give you?

A. Yes. Many types of background investigation involve a personal interview. Moreover, you may submit information on extra pages with your questionnaire if you feel you need to more fully explain details or circumstances of the answers you put on the form.

Q. Who gets to see the report you prepare about me? Do I?

A. The only persons authorized to see this information are Personnel Security, Suitability, and Investigations professionals who have been investigated and have a demonstrated need to review the information. You may request a copy of your investigation file under provisions of the Privacy Act. For an OPM investigation request, write to OPM-IS, FOIP, Post Office Box 618, Boyers, PA 16018-0618. You must include your full name, Social Security Number, date and place of birth, and you must sign your request.

Q. What if you talk to someone who just doesn't like me and they lie about me?

A. We talk to as many knowledgeable people as possible to get a balanced, accurate, and comprehensive picture of the person being investigated. Later, you may have an opportunity to refute any misleading or false information that was reported about you.

Q. I was arrested for speeding once; will that keep me from getting a job or a clearance?

A. Any negative information is evaluated regarding its recency, seriousness, relevance to the position and duties, and in light of, and in relationship to, all other information about you.

Q. I got into some trouble 20 years ago; is that going to be held against me now?

A. See our previous answer.

Q. I'm physically handicapped; will that hurt my chances for a job?

A. No. It is against Federal law to discriminate based on a handicapping condition.

Q. Are you going to tell my boss that I'm looking for a job?

A. It is a requirement of a background investigation that your current employer be contacted. We must verify your employment data and make other inquiries concerning your background. If you are a Federal employee or contractor, it may be that your current employer needs you to have a security clearance for the work you do. In other instances, generally you are asked to complete the investigative form for an investigation and clearance only after a conditional offer of employment has been made for a position requiring a security clearance.

Q. Who decides if I get the job or a security clearance?

A. Personnel Security Specialist with Departmental Administration will adjudicate your case and communicate their decision to the appropriate personnel or security office.

Q. Is it true that the investigation will include a credit report about me?

A. Yes. A search of the records of commercial credit reporting agencies is an integral part of almost all background investigations.

Q. Do you ever interview someone's ex-spouse or relatives?

A. Yes, although, in many instances, interviewing ex-spouses or relatives is not mandatory.

Q. I graduated from high school and college many years ago; why do you need detailed information about my education?

A. Someone's education is a major consideration when education or expertise in a particular discipline is a qualifications requirement for the job. In any case, we need to verify the claims you make about your background.

Q. I was politically active during the last elections; will that hurt my chances for a job or a clearance?

A. No. It will neither hurt nor help your chances.

Q. Do I have to go to a police station to be fingerprinted?

A. You may go to a police station to be fingerprinted. In most instances, however, the agency requiring the investigation and clearance will fingerprint you.

Q. Doesn't the FBI conduct all Federal background investigations?

A. Actually, the U.S. Office of Personnel Management, the Department of Defense, and a few other agencies share this responsibility. The FBI mostly conducts investigations of high level Presidential appointees (Cabinet Officers and agency heads) and staff who may work at the White House directly for the President.

Q. Lots of contractors say that you need a security clearance to apply for their jobs. How can I get a clearance in advance so I can apply for these jobs? Can I pay for it myself?

A. The Office of Personnel Management has no procedure for an individual to independently apply for an investigation or security clearance. Clearances are based on investigations

requested by Federal agencies, appropriate to specific positions and their duties. Until a person is offered such a position, the government will not request or pay for an investigation for a clearance. Once a person has been offered a job (contingent upon satisfactory completion of an investigation), the government will require the person to complete a Standard Form 86, *Questionnaire for National Security Positions*, initiate the investigation, adjudicate the results, and issue the appropriate clearance.

We know that some Defense Department contractors require applicants to already have a clearance, and they have the right to administer their personnel hiring procedures the way they want as long as they don't discriminate based on prohibited factors (such as race or religion). Persons who already have clearances are those who are already employed by a government contractor (or by the government itself) and are looking for other job opportunities.

Q. How long does a background investigation take?

A. Because of the number of variable factors involved, there is no definitive answer to this question.

The kind of investigation to be conducted (which, for example, can be based on the level of a security clearance needed) will depend on the reason for the investigation. Different kinds of background investigations have different requirements for the scope of the investigative coverage to be obtained.

Some persons have more complex backgrounds than other persons and, consequently, more time is required to conduct a complete investigation.

Sometimes, the investigative workload of the investigating agency is such that Investigators cannot work at their ordinary levels of efficiency and timeliness.