

Senate To Examine Security Clearances In Wake Of Navy Yard Shooting

By ERIC TUCKER 10/31/13 11:20 AM ET EDT **AP**



Like 2 people like this.



WASHINGTON -- WASHINGTON (AP) — Federal officials say they are retooling aspects of the nation's security clearance system, including the process of re-evaluating the behavior of employees and contractors who have access to sensitive information, according to testimony at a Senate hearing Thursday.

The hearing Thursday before the Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs is to examine the adequacy of background checks and the security clearance system for federal employees and contract workers. It comes as officials investigate how Aaron Alexis, a 34-year-old defense contractor, was able to acquire and maintain a secret clearance despite a series of violent outbursts, repeated brushes with the law and concerns about his mental health.

The former Navy reservist killed 12 people inside the Navy Yard building where he worked Sept. 16 before being fatally shot by police. He entered the property with a valid security badge.

"The tragic events at the Navy Yard highlight the need to be ever-vigilant in ensuring that individuals entrusted with access to classified information, and, more generally, other individuals with logical and physical access to federal facilities and information do not present either a national security risk or a personal security risk," Elaine Kaplan said in remarks prepared for the Senate hearing. Kaplan is acting director of the Office of Personnel Management, which oversees more than 90 percent of background investigations for the federal government.

President Barack Obama has also ordered the White House budget office to examine security standards for government contractors and employees across federal agencies. Concerns about weaknesses in the security clearance system have surfaced not only with Alexis but also with National Security Agency leaker Edward Snowden and Army Pvt. Chelsea Manning, currently imprisoned for leaking classified documents.

One revision discussed Thursday is the process by which security clearance holders are re-investigated. That currently happens every five years for those with top secret clearances and every 10 years for holders of secret clearances.

A new tool emerging from an executive order would allow that review to happen at any time, including automated records checks of government and commercial databases, said Brian Prioletti, an assistant director in the Office of the Director of National Intelligence.

Sen. Tom Carper, the committee chairman and a Delaware Democrat, said he was concerned that a "troubled, unstable individual" could have ever received a security clearance.

"Many national security experts have long argued that the security clearance process is antiquated and in need of modernization. Given recent events, I think we have to ask whether the system is fundamentally flawed," Carper said.

Sen. Tom Coburn, the committee's top Republican, said the shooting proved that "our system is obviously broken

Defense officials have said that when Alexis applied for security clearance with the Navy, he lied about a 2004 arrest in Seattle for shooting the tires of an unoccupied vehicle and he failed to disclose thousands of dollars in debts. An FBI fingerprint check revealed the arrest, but an investigative report from an OPM contractor omitted the fact that Alexis had fired shots, court records in Seattle did not detail the circumstances of the arrest, and no charges were filed.

Alexis was granted a secret clearance in 2008 and held onto it despite multiple subsequent encounters with police, including a 2010 arrest in Texas, where a neighbor told police she was nearly struck by a bullet fired from his downstairs apartment. No charges were filed.

Kaplan said her staff has advised her that Alexis's file "complied with all applicable standards," but that OPM's office of internal oversight and compliance is reviewing the matter.

One month before the Navy Yard shooting, Alexis called police in Rhode Island to the hotel where he was staying and complained about voices wanting to harm him, according to the police report. The FBI has said he believed he was being bombarded with extremely low frequency radio waves.

Four senators on Wednesday introduced legislation to require more frequent checks on government employees and contractors who are awarded security clearances.

The bill requires OPM to do at least two audits of every security clearance at random times over each five years the clearance is in effect. Surprise audits would send the message that "you never know when the government is going to find out," so it's better to come forward with the information voluntarily, said one sponsor, Democratic Sen. Claire McCaskill of Missouri.