

Officials Question Whether Contractors Should Do Background Checks

By Sean Reilly A White House review triggered by last week's Washington Navy Yard shootings will examine whether security clearance investigations should continue to be left to contractors or handled directly by the government, Deputy Defense Secretary Ashton Carter said Wednesday. "That's something we need to look at," Carter said at a Pentagon news briefing, adding that the issue transcends DoD. Given that millions of federal employees and contractors throughout the government have clearances, another issue is how investigators can do the "thorough and careful job" needed to have a reasonable chance of uncovering an applicant's violent tendencies, Carter said. Besides the White House review, which is being conducted by the Office of Management and Budget, there are three other DoD and Navy inquiries underway following the Sept. 16 rampage by Aaron Alexis that killed 12 people. A key question is how Alexis, who reported hearing voices and was arrested in 2010 for firing a gun through the ceiling of his apartment, was able to hold on to the secret clearance that he received in 2008. Alexis was killed by police during the shooting. His background check was performed by USIS of Falls Church, Va., the largest federal contractor in the field. The Office of Personnel Management, which oversees the government's background investigation process, has said the investigation was handled properly. But Navy Secretary Ray Mabus has since ordered the Navy and Marine Corps to assign more senior officers to be command security managers and to require commanding officers to sign off on performance reviews, officials said this week. Authorities should go further and overhaul the entire clearance system, said Chris Graham, a former administrative judge at the Defense Office of Hearing and Appeals, a DoD agency that handles appeals from clearance applicants who are turned down. To provide governmentwide consistency, the Defense Department should be charged with issuing all clearances, with background checks done in-house by government employees, not contractors, said Graham, who now has his own practice representing clients with security clearance problems. In addition, he said, officials should review all jobs that need access to classified information "with the idea that there are far too many people required to have a security clearance who really don't need one." As of last October, more than 4.9 million federal employees and contractors had clearances, according to the most recent compilation by the Office of the Director of National Intelligence.