

## **Obtaining a U.S. Government Security Clearance Mississippi State University**

Hello. A request has been received that you obtain a security clearance. If you have never had a security clearance you are probably wondering why me, what is it, what do I have to do, how long will it take, and so on.

First, I am Neil Lewis, the Office of Research and Economic Development (ORED) Facility Security Officer (FSO). My position is required by the National Industrial Security Program or NISP for all commercial companies and organizations that have classified contracts with the U.S. Government. Consequently I handle all of the security requirements associated with classified contracts. This includes obtaining/maintaining a security clearances, conducting the security education/training/awareness effort as it pertains to classified information/material, receiving/storing/dispersing classified material, security concerns, investigating security violations/infractions and anything else that has to do with maintaining the security to perform classified work.

Having a security clearance is a privilege and not a right. Only U.S. citizens are eligible for a security clearance. It says that you are an honest and trustworthy individual, who can view and work on sensitive and protected projects that involve our national security. Depending upon your level of clearance this can be a great responsibility. The clearance levels are:

- Confidential or C
- Secret or S
- Top Secret or TS

Confidential (C) means that you have access to information that if disclosed will damage to the national security. This level of clearance is hardly if ever used anymore.

Secret (S) means that you have access to information that if disclosed will cause serious damage to our national security. Most information is held at the secret level. To obtain a secret clearance you will have to go through an investigation called a NACLIC – National Agency Check with Local Agency and Credit Check. You will need to fill out a Standard Form 86 or SF-86 for the NACLIC. The SF-86 has been updated to an electronic version which is explained later. You will need to provide information that goes back 7 years for the SF-86 submission. You will also have to have a security reinvestigation every 10 years to maintain a secret clearance.

Top Secret (TS) means that you access to information that if disclosed will cause exceptionally grave damage to our national security. To obtain a TS clearance you have to go through a SSBI or Single Scope Background Investigation. Again the form used is the SF-86 however you have to provide information that goes back 10 years and the reinvestigation cycle is every 5 years to maintain a top secret clearance.

The clearances described above are described as “collateral”. This is a security term for a general all purpose clearance. The higher level clearances are those that are compartmented or have access to code word designated programs or efforts. These higher level clearances are usually designated with your collateral clearance then a slash then the compartmented clearance or codeword designation. Example - TS/SCI is a compartmented clearance that states you have Top Secret with Sensitive Compartmented Information access; TS/SCI/CRYPTO again you have Top

Secret Sensitive Compartmented Information access and you have access to and can work on Cryptographic devices. Clearances can become so loaded down with compartmented designations and codeword program access that your clearance can look like alphabet soup.

How long will the process of obtaining a clearance take? That depends upon a number of things, how much you have moved around and traveled, the answers to questions on the SF-86, scheduling of the investigators, and so on. It could take as little as 3-4 months to as long as a year or more.

Do not be afraid of the forms, the questions asked or the process. The clearance process looks at you as a whole, not just one specific item or part. Just because your foot slipped over the line a time or two, may not disqualify you for a clearance. Be truthful and honest in your answers, if the investigators need more information they will contact you.

### The Process

The clearance process has several steps:

1. Authorization for Release and Use of Information
2. Proof of Citizenship
3. Local Agency Check
4. Department of Defense database
5. eQIP
6. eQIP Submission
7. Interim Clearance
8. Final Clearance
9. Clearance Maintenance

1. Authorization for Release and Use of Information - This is a release that allows the FSO to use your social security number as that is the identifier used by the U.S. Government to track security clearances. Also the release authorizes the FSO to conduct a local agency check on you. This is an important required first step for obtaining a security clearance.

Before going any further please be assured that the information obtained and that you provide to the FSO will be seen, or shared by/with anyone else or be used for any other purpose that to obtain a security clearance. Additionally any and all information is protected by the U.S. Privacy Act of 1975. I am also bound by the act to protect your information. There will be more on this topic later in this document.

You need to read and sign the authorization/release so that I can forward your information to the Campus Police, Human Resources and Health Center for the local agency check (more detail concerning this is contained in item #2). Also included with the releases is a Personal History form. This information is needed in order to add you to the MSU account in the Department of Defense (DoD) Joint Personnel Adjudication System (JPAS) database. This database is the system of record for tracking all personnel security clearances for the DoD.

2. Proof of Citizenship – Per the National Industrial Security Program Operating Manual section 2-207 entitled Verification of U.S. Citizenship, requires each applicant for a personal clearance level (PCL) who claims U.S. citizenship to produce evidence of citizenship. I must see the proof of citizenship.

This can take several different forms:

- A birth certificate is the primary and preferred means of citizenship verification. Acceptable certificates must show that the birth recorded was filed shortly after birth and it must be certified with the registrar's signature. It must bear the raised, impressed, or multicolor seal of the registrar's office. The only exception is if a State or other jurisdiction does not issue such seals as a matter of policy. Uncertified copies of birth certificates are not acceptable. A delayed birth certificate is one created when a record was filed more than one year after the date of birth. Such a certificate is acceptable if it shows the report was supported by acceptable secondary evidence. Secondary evidence may include: baptismal or circumcision certificates, hospital birth records, or affidavits of persons having personal knowledge about the facts of birth. Other documentary evidence can be early census, school or family bible records, newspaper files, or insurance papers. All documents submitted as evidence of birth in the U.S. shall be original or certified documents.
- If the citizenship is claimed by naturalization, a certificate of naturalization is acceptable proof of citizenship.
- If citizenship was acquired by birth abroad to a U.S. citizen parent or parents the following are acceptable evidence:
  - A certificate of citizenship issued by the Department of Homeland Security, U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services or its predecessor organization.
  - A report of birth abroad of a citizen of the U.S.A.
  - A certificate of birth
- A passport, current or expired, is acceptable proof of citizenship.
- A record of military processing-armed forces of the U.S., form DD-1966, provided it reflects U.S. citizenship is an acceptable proof of citizenship.

3. Local Agency check - I check with the Campus Police, Human Resources and the Health Center. All I ask is for a "favorable" or "unfavorable" response, I see no information. The local agency check is a requirement for the submission of the clearance investigation request. The local agency check will not be initiated until I receive the signed release from you.

4. Department of Defense Joint Personnel Adjudication System (JPAS) - When the local agency check has been completed and you have been added to the DOD/JPAS system the request for a Personnel Security Investigation or PSI can be sent. This is the formal request to initiate the security clearance process.

5. eQIP - (Electronic Questionnaire for Investigations Processing) - This is the electronic version of the standard form 86 (SF-86, a hard copy can be found on the GSA website, <http://www.gsa.gov> go the standard forms and scroll to the SF-86) which asks all of the invasive questions on who you are, family, residences, references, and all of the drug/medical/criminal questions. For a secret clearance they will go back 7 years and for a top secret 10 years. The questionnaire is setup so it automatically knows the time limits. Once we get to this point I will send you another E-mail with e-QIP instructions. This step occurs after approval of the submitted PCI request.

***Per regulation I must inform you of the following:***

*The FSO or designee will review the information in the SF-86 (e-QIP) for adequacy and completeness, only. The information will be used for no other purpose within the company, and the information provided by you is protected by Section 552a of Title 5, United State Code, "Privacy Act of 1975". The FSO or designee also shall not share any information from the SF-86 or e-QIP to anyone within the company.*

*I am also bound by the Privacy Act to protect the information. I, Neil E. Lewis, Facility Security Officer for Mississippi State University will be reviewing the SF-86 (e-QIP) information.*

*This review notification is required by the National Industrial Security Program Operation Manual, DOD 5220.22-M dated 28 February 2006, Section 2 - Personnel Security Clearances, paragraph 2-202a. If there are any questions, please do not hesitate to contact the Facility Security Office, telephone number 325-8682.*

Also when you have completed the e-QIP form, print out a copy for yourself and file it for future use. A signed original copy must also be forwarded to the FSO per the following regulation:

National Industrial Security Program Operating Manual, DOD 5220.22-M dated 28 February 2006, Section 2 – Personnel Security Clearances, paragraph 2-202b which states: “The FSO or designee shall retain an original signed copy of the SF-86, the Authorization for Release of Information and Records, and the Authorization for Release of Medical Information until the clearance process is complete. The FSO or designee shall maintain the retained documentation in such a manner that the confidentiality of the documents is preserved and protected against access by anyone within the company other than the FSO or designee. When the applicant’s eligibility for access to classified information has been granted or denied, the retained information shall be destroyed.”

The above is very important you must provide the FSO with a hardcopy of the e-QIP form. Failure to do so has caused us to receive warnings from DSS. You will be reminded to provide a copy.

FYI – For the destruction we must use a DOD approved destruction device which in this case is a cross cut paper shredder that produces paper particles no larger than 1/32” x 1/2”.

6. e-QIP Submission - Once all of the information has been reviewed and the certification/releases (yes there are three more, one to certify your signature, one to authorize release of information regarding the investigation and release of medical information), the form is sent electronically by the FSO to the Defense Security Service. They review it for completeness; if all is correct they will issue you an interim clearance at the level requested and forward the e-QIP information on to the Office of Personnel Management, who performs the actual background investigation.

7. Interim clearance – If everything is correct with your eQIP submission the Defense Industrial Security Clearance Office or DISCO will issue you an interim clearance. This usually occurs with 24-36 hours after the e-QIP submission is received but depends upon how busy DISCO is at the particular time. When the FSO receives notification that you have been granted an interim clearance, you will be contacted to schedule a time for you to read and sign the Non Disclosure Agreement (SF-312). This is a contract between you and the USG that you will never divulge the information to which you have access to because of your security clearance now and for the rest of your life, unless you are released in writing from this obligation by a duly appointed and credentialed representative of the USG. You will also receive an initial security briefing at that time. Until you sign the SF-312 and receive the initial security briefing, your clearance is not activated.

It is possible that a interim clearance will be denied, if that is the case the FSO will receive a notice of declination. If this happens the FSO will also notify you. Do not worry, a notice of declination is not necessarily a bad thing, it just means that some item triggered this response by the adjudicator reviewing your submission and more information is required. The additional information will be obtained during the investigation phase of the process. You just have to wait until the entire clearance process is completed and your case adjudicated to know if will be able to obtain a security clearance.

8. Final Clearance - Once your investigation is completed and your request adjudicated, the interim clearance will be changed to a final clearance. This is a transparent process; the FSO will inform you when this occurs via E-mail. However with an interim clearance you will have almost all of the rights and privileges of personnel with a final clearance. If for any reason during the course of the background investigation any derogatory information is discovered the possibility exists that your interim clearance can be revoked until completion of the background investigation and adjudication of your case.

9. Clearance Maintenance - There are a couple of items of which you must be aware to maintain your clearance. You will be subject to random drug testing which is part of the Drug Free Workplace clauses in USG contracts; you will receive refresher security training each year this is required by the Defense Security Service; and depending upon your clearance level a security reinvestigation is required - every 5 years for Top Secret & every 10 years for Secret.

The following are areas/items to watch out for when filling out the e-QIP form.

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1. Enter complete and accurate information, incomplete or discrepant information will result in refection of the investigation request.
2. Applicant name, rejected if spelling is discrepant compared with other documents or not shown. Do not use an initial only – if you have no first or middle name select No First Name (NFN) or No Middle Name (NMN) as appropriate. If you have only initials in your name, enter the initial(s) (without the period) and select Initial Only (IO).
3. Other names used, rejected if other forms indicate presence of another name (last, first or middle name discrepancy) and is not listed.
4. Place of Birth (POB) rejected if city or county not reflected.
5. Social Security Number rejected if not listed, or if other forms reflect discrepancy.
6. Height must be listed in feet and inches.
7. Weight must be listed in pounds.
8. Ensure you list hair and eye color as appropriate.
9. List all the places you have lived for the last 7 years for a NACLCLC (Secret clearance investigation) and 10 years for a SSBI (Top Secret clearance investigation).
10. Each residence must list month/year and the city/state/zip code.
11. Ensure there are no gaps in residence information over two months.
12. Where you went to school, list all education within the last 7 years for NACLCLC and 10 years for SSBI. Note: If all education occurred more than 7 years ago (10 years for SSBI), list the most recent education beyond high school no matter when it occurred.
13. Provide to and from dates of attendance (month and year) of where you went to school and complete school name, street address, zip code and date of degree if applicable (year only).

14. List all employment activities within the last 7 years (again SSBI requires 10 years).
15. Provide dates of employment (month and year) and the name and mailing address of employer include city/state and zip code.
16. Martial status, a current martial status block must be checked.
17. If “married” is checked, the name of current spouse, along with requested information must be provided.
18. If you are divorced or widowed, provide full name, date of birth, place of birth and citizenship of former spouse(s), and the date and place married.
19. Ensure you indicate if you are divorced or widowed.
20. If applicable indicate the city and state where the divorce is recorded (list country if not in the U.S.).
21. SSBI and SSBS periodic reinvestigations require the last known address of former spouse(s).
22. Ensure you list all information required on relatives and associates, form will be rejected if left unanswered.
23. Information regarding parents and mother-in-law/father-in-law must be provided even if they are deceased.
24. Citizenship of relatives and associates, provide naturalization, certificate or alien registration number if foreign born.
25. Ensure information on parents and in-laws if married is listed even if they are deceased. If they are deceased so state in the space provided.
26. Foreign countries you have visited provide month and year of travel.
27. Military service, ensure the question “Have you served in the United States military is answered. It must be answered “yes” or “no”.
28. Selective Service record, all applicants (male and female) must answer the question, “Are you a male born after December 31. 1959?” If the answer is “yes” you must indicate you have registered with the Selective Service System.
29. If you do not know your Selective Service number, go to <https://www.sss.gov/RegVer/wfVerification.aspx> and follow the directions to obtain it.
30. Ensure you pay attention to question number 20 , “Foreign activities” especially the subparagraphs.

Think that covers it for now. Please if you have any questions, do not hesitate to contact the FSO. One other thing which you must know, the decision to obtain a security clearance is voluntary and is a very invasive process which some folks can not withstand or abide by.