

DHS Plagued By Turnover In Top Positions

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The [Department of Homeland Security](#) lost senior leaders at twice the rate of the rest of the federal government over the past two years, including 23 of 26 top officials who report to the secretary, according to a new government report and DHS officials.

Turnover was highest at headquarters, where more than half of 60 presidential appointees and senior executives left in 2005 and 2006, according to a draft report by the [Government Accountability Office](#), Congress's audit arm.

The leadership losses reflect "enormous challenges" facing the department four years after its March 2003 merger of 22 agencies, with "serious consequences for the security of our country," according to congressional auditors.

A copy of the study, to be published as early as today, was released by the House Homeland Security Committee.

"It is no wonder that this department is struggling with its integration when its own headquarters has lost half of its senior staff to turnover," committee Chairman [Bennie Thompson](#) (D-Miss.) said. "When senior leadership doesn't stick around long enough for their coffee to get cold, the nation's security suffers."

Speaking last Tuesday to a group of lobbyists and business leaders hosted by the Cohen Group, Deputy Secretary [Michael P. Jackson](#) said the department is building an effective leadership team. It is understandable that most of 26 senior appointees would change when [Michael Chertoff](#) took over from [Tom Ridge](#) in early 2005, Jackson noted.

"We're two years into a turnover of that magnitude," Jackson said. "What you're seeing is you have a challenge. At the political level the team is there and working. At the career level, we're working on a succession plan" that will have top staffers cross-trained and able to take over top roles across agencies by January 2009, when a new president takes charge.

The draft GAO report noted that personnel at most Homeland Security components said that filling top positions was either not a problem or only a slight to moderate problem.

Overall, the department reported a leadership attrition rate of 15 percent in 2005 and 13 percent in 2006. Among all workers, the [Transportation Security Administration](#) lost 18 percent of airport screeners in 2005 and 15 percent in 2006. Not counting screeners, the DHS lost 3 percent of workers -- less than the federal average of 4 percent.

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