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GAO Report Highlights Unacceptable Risks To Employees' Physical Safety, Kelley Says

Washington, D.C.—A government report detailing a number of Internal Revenue Service (IRS) management failings, including on important security matters, shines a light on unacceptable risks to the physical safety of agency employees, the leader of the National Treasury Employees Union (NTEU) said today.

The IRS “needs to move promptly and effectively” to address the security lapses detailed in the Government Accountability Office (GAO) report, said NTEU President Colleen M. Kelley.

“IRS employees have the right not to be concerned about their physical security while in the workplace,” the union leader said.

As part of its fiscal 2005 audit of the IRS, GAO reported finding problems with security controls at Taxpayer Assistance Centers (TACs) and Service Centers, such as inoperable emergency alarms, unlocked doors separating the taxpayer areas from controlled areas and even the lack of signs alerting customers that they were not permitted into an area unescorted. At one Service Center, GAO said, “alarms were not always functional and gaps existed in perimeter security.”

Noting the agency’s heavy reliance on security guards to control access to IRS facilities, GAO described several instances in which guards “did not always effectively fulfill these responsibilities.”

While GAO was reviewing these matters at one TAC, it said, security guards left their posts to escort taxpayers to the workstations of IRS employees, leaving customers unsupervised in a waiting area that was accessible to controlled space through a door that was unlocked. And at one service center, according to the report, it took security nearly 10 minutes to respond to an alarm—and because of an unspecified “understanding” that a door was malfunctioning, security personnel found it unnecessary even to document the incident.

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GAO Report Highlights IRS Security Failings—Add One

“It is unfortunately true,” President Kelley said, “that IRS personnel can be the targets of disgruntled taxpayers. That’s what makes these security failures so dangerous.”

GAO also said it found a variety of other operational failings adversely impacting the safeguarding of both tax receipts and information—including the failure of two lockbox banks to immediately process and deposit large checks according to agency guidelines.

These problems, GAO said, “increase the risk that taxpayer receipts and information could be lost, stolen, misused or destroyed, and physical assets could be stolen or valued incorrectly.”

The documented risks to private taxpayer information—this report is far from the first time the problem has been pointed out, both within and outside the IRS—is at the heart of NTEU’s continuing objection to the IRS plan to contract the collection of tax debts to private sector debt collectors in exchange for a bounty of the money they collect.

“Each time this issue is examined,” Kelley said, “the answer is always the same—there is an unacceptable risk to taxpayer information in the privatization program.” NTEU is pressing Congress to approve H.R. 1621, bipartisan legislation that would revoke the IRS’s authority to hire debt collectors.

“The problems identified in the GAO report both encompass and go beyond the IRS’s well-documented inability to monitor and control the performance of its private sector contractors,” President Kelley said. “These are internal problems that are entirely in the hands of IRS managers at every level to fix and control—and they should do so immediately.”

NTEU is the largest independent federal union, representing some 150,000 federal workers in 30 agencies and departments, including 90,000 in the IRS.

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