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FBI Doesn't Take Sentinel Computer System Criticism Lightly

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Late, over budget and lacking critical components were the three main shots the Department of Justice's Office of the Inspector General leveled at the FBI on the agency's over-arching computer system revamp known as Sentinel.

The OIG review found that as of August 2010, after spending about \$405 million of the \$451 million budgeted for the Sentinel project, the FBI has delivered only two of Sentinel's four phases to its agents. And perhaps more worrisome, the most challenging development work for Sentinel still remains, the report states.

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"Our concerns about the progress of the project have intensified because Sentinel is approximately \$100 million over budget and 2 years behind schedule. When Sentinel's current \$451 million budget was adopted, the combined cost of Phases 1 and 2 of Sentinel was approximately \$306 million. As result, at this stage of the project, Sentinel is approximately 32% over budget," the report states.

The report went on to say that auditors found that while Sentinel has delivered some improvements to the FBI's case management system, it has not delivered much of what it originally intended. In July 2010, the FBI deployed Phase 2 of Sentinel, which provides the FBI's agents and analysts with the beginnings of an electronic case management system. Yet, by July 2010 Sentinel was intended to generate and securely process 18 paperless case-related forms through the review and approval process. Sentinel now only has the capability to generate and process four of the 18 forms. Moreover, even these four forms still are not fully automated. Because Sentinel's four phases have not been

completed, FBI agents and analysts can use Sentinel to generate the four forms, but they must still print the forms to obtain approval signatures, and they must maintain hard copy files with the required approval signatures.

"Additionally, because the FBI has not finished the third and fourth Phases of Sentinel, FBI agents and analysts do not have the planned expanded capabilities to search the FBI's case files. Nor can they use Sentinel to manage evidence, as originally intended," according to the report.

But the FBI today fired back saying: "We believe that the interim report does not accurately reflect the FBI's management of the Sentinel project, and fails to credit the FBI with taking corrective action to keep it on budget. Moreover, the interim report comes at a time when the FBI has changed its plan for completing the project, and the Department of Justice has authorized us to go forward with our new approach. The report, however, continues to rely on outdated cost estimates that do not apply to the current FBI plan."

The FBI said the report also includes an inflated cost estimate for completing Sentinel that is based on a worst-case scenario for a plan that we are no longer using. The FBI discarded that approach in favor of agile development. In fact, outdated cost estimates of this sort led us to pursue our current approach.

"The FBI has and will continue to work with the OIG to review our use of agile development to complete the Sentinel project. However, we are concerned that this interim report does not comply with generally accepted government accounting standards, which the report acknowledges. In the future, the FBI requests that the OIG use these auditing standards in its review of the Sentinel project and not rely on 'interim' reports that do not accurately reflect the status of the project."

The Sentinel project began in 2006 with a \$305 million contract to Lockheed Martin as part of the \$425 million project. At that time the FBI expected to implement Sentinel in four overlapping phases, each lasting 12 to 16 months. Each phase was intended to provide a stand-alone set of capabilities upon which subsequent phases would add further capabilities. The fourth and final phase of Sentinel was originally scheduled to be completed by December 2009, according to the IOG report.

The FBI intended that Sentinel, when fully implemented, would provide FBI agents and analysts with a user-friendly, Web-based electronic case management system that would give them the ability to manage evidence and automate the document review and approval process. Additionally, Sentinel was designed to be the official FBI records repository and provide users with expanded search capabilities, enhancing agents' ability to link cases with similar information, according to the OIG report.

According to the FBI, "thousands of FBI employees use Sentinel each day for their work, including drafting interview reports, sending leads, and managing their caseloads. Moreover, the FBI recently received verbal authority from the National Archives and Records Administration to use forms now available on Sentinel as official FBI records. Unfortunately, the interim report does not fairly credit these management initiatives and achievements."

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This story, "FBI Doesn't Take Sentinel Computer System Criticism Lightly" was originally published by NetworkWorld.



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