

# Richard Spires

Chief Information Officer

U.S. Department of Homeland Security

*By Michael J. Keegan*

## Leveraging IT to Enhance DHS Mission Effectiveness



In the midst of its seventh anniversary, the U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS) issued its first-ever Quadrennial Homeland Security Review (QHSR) that delineates a strategy focusing on five mission priority areas for the homeland security enterprise. “Mission one is preventing terrorism and enhancing the security of the country. Mission area two is securing and managing our borders; three, enforcing and

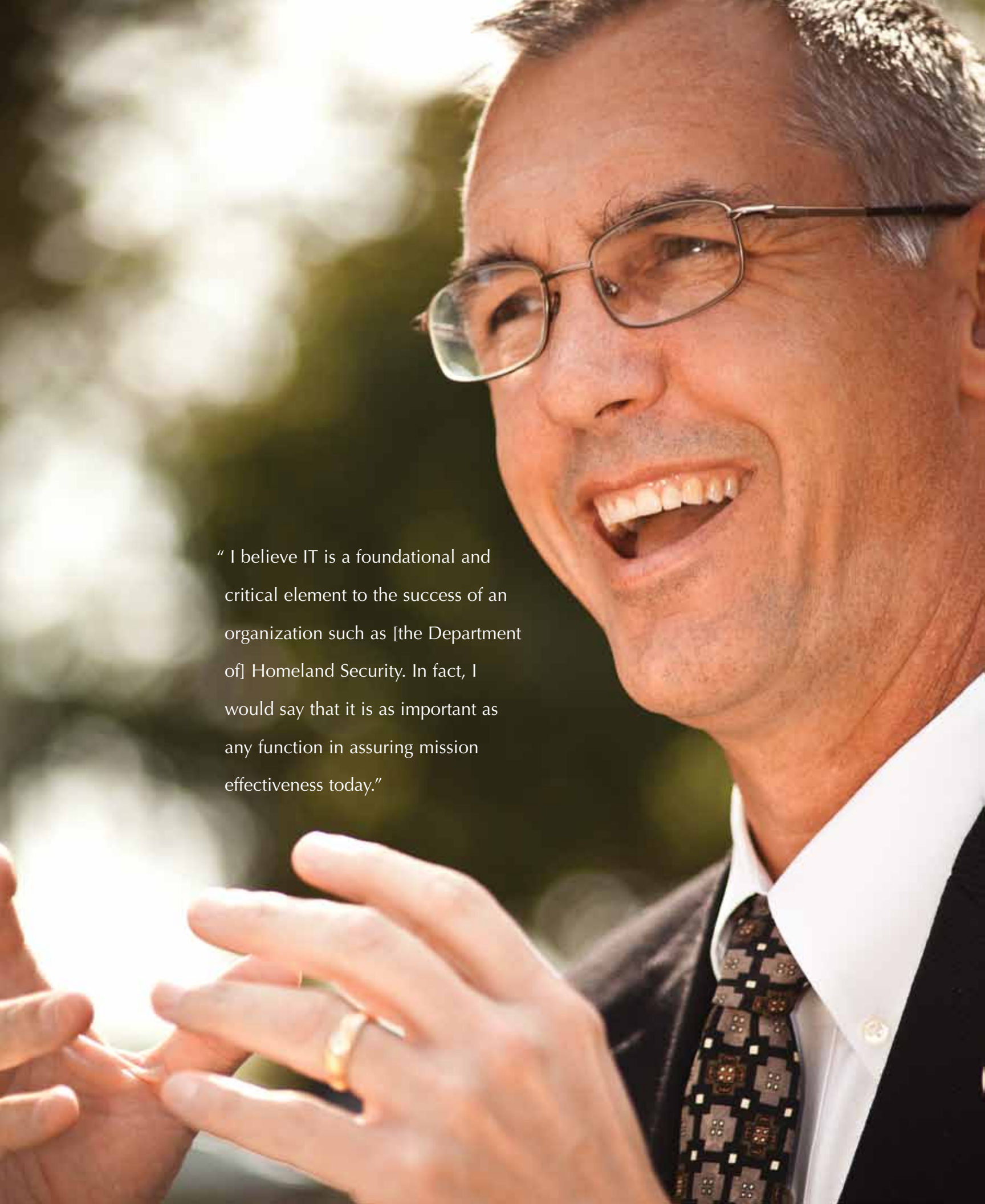
administering our immigration laws; four, safeguarding and securing cyberspace; and then the fifth is ensuring resilience to disasters,” explains Richard Spires, chief information officer (CIO) at DHS. There are many components, both in and outside of DHS, that play a role in fulfilling these missions, but it is DHS and its 230,000 employees spread over 22 operating organizations that are at the forefront. “I believe,” declares Spires, “IT [information technology] is a foundational and critical element to the success of an organization such as [the Department of] Homeland Security. In fact, I would say that it is as important as any function in assuring mission effectiveness today.”

Since becoming CIO in September 2009, Spires has refocused the IT strategy of the department in support of Secretary Napolitano’s One DHS vision: a single enterprise, a shared vision realized through integrated, results-based operations. He has accomplished this while managing a robust IT portfolio and an investment budget of \$6.4 billion. This is no small feat, given the size and diversity of DHS, its missions, and the multiple components that operate within it. Spires has spearheaded a number of critical IT initiatives to realize this vision and enhance the agency’s IT functions across the

enterprise. “We need to improve how we manage our largest IT investments,” admits Spires. “We do have pockets of excellence, but overall we’re just not managing these investments as well as we need to.” This is by no means unique to DHS. Inefficient IT project management seems endemic across the federal government. For Spires, the status quo was unacceptable. To that end, he initiated an IT program review that assessed the performance of the department’s major projects to identify those that were troubled, find ways to cut costs, mitigate risks, and improve overall program management.

“This is essentially my version of [the] TechStat [accountability sessions] that Vivek Kundra has [started]. I completed 81 reviews. There have been significant changes to some programs based on these reviews,” acknowledges Spires. From these reviews, he has sought to integrate the right tools, processes, and standards across DHS to ensure program performance. “It’s really about institutionalizing best practices and really working to make sure that the proper governance and oversight exist for these programs; that the proper disciplines are being implemented to manage them effectively.” Spires has plans to set up a program management center of excellence, to assist DHS components with best practices, tools, and standards gathered from within the department, across government, and within industry.

Using best practices and standardization only strengthens IT governance, which is another priority for Richard Spires. “While we’re one department, too often we still operate as 22 different component organizations,” he explains. “We need to draw that line between what we should provide at the enterprise level and what should be done at the components’ [level].” To reach that goal, Spires is pursuing a cross-cutting governance approach that views things from a functional or portfolio perspective. “I’m really trying to



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drive a governance model that helps us define where there’s leverage potential across the enterprise.” It’s about eliminating duplication and using IT capabilities that may be thriving in one component that are applicable to others. “We’re doing things from an enterprise perspective when it makes sense... IT requires a collaborative effort and that’s where governance comes in. I’m a huge believer—if you get the right people at the right level around the table, with a shared sense of mission and outcome, you can really do some amazing things,” declares Spires.

Under his leadership, DHS continues to pursue many things at an enterprise level, such as the acceleration of its data center consolidation as well as migration to the department’s OneNet platform. These initiatives are front-and-center, presenting a host of benefits and challenges. “I think the benefits are manifold,” exclaims Spires. The data consolidation initiative, for instance, involves migrating 24 disparate data centers into two. According to Spires, this migration will further standardize technology and services across DHS, while also reducing energy and operational costs. Regarding the challenges being faced, Spires explains, “It is human nature for people to want to control their own environment. We come in as the department to shut that down and move all of their systems into a new environment. It’s uncomfortable. We have to build trust that we can deliver not just the same level of service, but improved service.” Over the last year, DHS has begun providing e-mail as an enterprise service out of its two data centers. It has also established Microsoft SharePoint as a service offering, seeking to reposition all intranets onto a common infrastructure. “These are great synergies,” declares Spires, “that we have been able to put in place within the last year. [They are] good examples of what we’re doing at that enterprise level.” He is also working to complete the consolidation of seven wide-area networks into one physical network infrastructure under the OneNet initiative.

Like many government agencies, DHS continues to look at the best way to properly expand its use of cloud computing technology. Cloud computing allows users to provision computing capabilities rapidly and as needed, to scale up and back as required, and to pay only for services used. For

Spires, the enterprise services offered to the components reflect, in a sense, the use of a private cloud. “We’re looking at what makes sense for DHS,” explains Spires. “We’re trying to be smart about this: Are there applications that make more sense for us to use [as] commercial-based cloud offerings or do we keep [them] in-house in our ‘private cloud offerings’ through our data centers? We don’t want to be paying twice as much to do it inside,” states Spires.

With a \$6.4 billion IT budget, DHS has an inherent responsibility to be a good steward of the public funds and to invest wisely. “We need to be a smart buyer to leverage that buying power in the best way whether we pool things, negotiate enterprise license agreements, or buy in bulk where it makes sense across components. There are initiatives underway to be more efficient about how we buy things. I have also put in place a process requiring [that] expenditures in excess of \$2.5 million receive my review,” notes Spires.

Many of these important efforts rely on having the right people with the right skills in place to provide the proper oversight and technical knowledge. “We can’t get any of this done without a really good staff,” admits Spires. “We need to have a strong government employee base within our IT functions to make this work, so getting that right balance [between contractor and employee] is really critical. We’re looking to rebalance our workforce, aggressively recruiting and getting very good people to join us as employees. In the end, it’s all about the people,” declares Spires. ■

To learn more about the U.S. Department of Homeland Security and its information technology strategy, go [www.dhs.gov/index.shtm](http://www.dhs.gov/index.shtm)



To hear *The Business of Government Hour’s* interview with Richard Spires, go to the Center’s website at [www.businessofgovernment.org](http://www.businessofgovernment.org).



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To read the full transcript of *The Business of Government Hour’s* interview with Richard Spires, visit the Center’s website at [www.businessofgovernment.org](http://www.businessofgovernment.org).