

# STATEMENT OF CHAIRMAN DANIEL K. AKAKA

## *Deployed Federal Civilians: Advancing Security and Opportunity in Afghanistan*

### Hearing

#### Subcommittee on Oversight of Government Management, the Federal Workforce, and the District of Columbia, Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs

Today's hearing – *Deployed Federal Civilians: Advancing Security and Opportunity in Afghanistan* – will review the readiness of and support for Federal employees who serve our Nation overseas.

I know that civilians serving in harm's way proudly answer the call of duty and are motivated by a strong sense of patriotism. We must ensure that they have the training and support they need.

Under President Obama's strategy for Afghanistan, as the United States works to destroy al Qaeda, the Nation also is working to build the capacity of the Afghan government and bring new opportunities to its people. A sharp increase in Federal civilian employees in Afghanistan is supporting this effort. Secretary of State Clinton has testified that almost 1,000 civilians would be in Afghanistan by early 2010. A further increase of 20 to 30 percent is expected by the end of this year.

In addition, nearly 1,600 civilians are deployed there in support of the Department of Defense's (DOD) operations.

Civilians are central to carrying out the mission in Afghanistan. The long-term efforts to improve governance, promote economic development, and fight corruption and the narcotics trade are necessary to the success of the military's mission of providing security and combating terrorism. The State Department expects our civilians to continue their work with the Afghan government and people after the departure of combat troops.

State and DOD have begun focusing greater attention on civilian readiness for operations in combat zones. DOD has developed comprehensive pre-deployment training for its civilian personnel who will serve in Afghanistan under the authority of CENTCOM. Likewise, the State Department has required courses for personnel, from State as well as other Federal agencies, who will serve under the Ambassador's authority.

This includes hands-on, operational training where persons of Afghan background orient trainees to Afghan customs, and where civilians get a feel of the environment they will face in Afghanistan.

Military personnel also participate in the training to educate civilians on the combined civilian-military efforts in Afghanistan.

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I am pleased that DOD and State have made training a priority and are committed to ensuring that civilian employees are ready for the challenges they will face.

We also must support these civilians during and after their service. In June 2009, the Government Accountability Office (GAO) reviewed the compensation and benefits for civilians serving in combat zones. GAO found that agencies should work to ensure:

- that compensation and benefits are appropriate and comparable among civilians;
- that deployed civilians receive all of the medical benefits and compensation to which they are entitled; and
- that agencies maintain sufficient data to inform civilians about emerging health issues that might affect them.

GAO's primary recommendation was for the Office of Personnel Management (OPM) to lead an interagency effort to address pay and benefit differences. I am eager to hear more about the progress made since GAO issued its report, especially in assisting civilians in receiving the medical support they need.

In my role as chairman of the Veterans Affairs Committee, I have been very concerned about the invisible wounds of war, including traumatic brain injury and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). Many civilians are exposed to the same hazards our military personnel face while deployed to areas of conflict. I believe that all Federal civilians need to be screened properly for these wounds upon their return and provided the benefits to which they are entitled.

I understand that OPM, working with State, DOD, and other Federal agencies, has developed a legislative proposal to ensure that pay and benefits are more consistent for deployed civilians, which I hope to learn more about.

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