

# STATEMENT OF CHAIRMAN DANIEL K. AKAKA

## *Closing the Language Gap: Improving the Federal Government's Foreign Language Capabilities*

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

Aloha and welcome to our witnesses and guests. I would like to thank you all for joining us here at today's hearing: *Closing the Language Gap: Improving the Federal Government's Foreign Language Capabilities*.

Today's hearing will examine the Federal government's foreign language capabilities and needs, particularly at the Departments of Homeland Security and Defense. We will examine these Departments' language efforts and explore how best to help meet the challenges of strengthening foreign language skills.

Foreign language skills are necessary to provide vital services to people with limited English abilities. Because of the rich cultural and linguistic diversity in my home state of Hawai'i, I understand well the need to communicate about disaster relief, social services, and other government programs in a variety of languages.

Understanding foreign languages is also vital to our economic security as Americans compete in the global marketplace. According to the Committee for Economic Development, American companies lose an estimated \$2 billion each year due to inadequate cross-cultural skills.

Moreover, foreign language proficiency and cultural understanding are essential to protecting our national security. Threats to our national security are becoming more complex, interconnected, and unconventional. These evolving threats have increased federal agencies' needs for employees proficient in foreign languages.

More agencies are coordinating and collaborating with other countries to advance their missions abroad. Both the Departments of Homeland Security and Defense partner with other nations to share information or conduct joint operations. The Commission on the Prevention of Weapons of Mass Destruction Proliferation and Terrorism as well as the Project on National Security Reform have concluded that foreign language proficiency is essential to protecting our Nation.

The shortage of language proficient federal workers, as well as Americans overall, is not a new phenomenon. More than three decades ago, the President's Commission on Foreign Language and International Studies recognized it was a serious and growing problem.

Over the years, the Government Accountability Office (GAO) has released several reports revealing language shortfalls that harm government effectiveness and undermine national security.

In 2002, GAO reported that several key national security agencies had shortages in translators and interpreters, as well as diplomats and intelligence specialists with critical foreign language skills. GAO found that shortages in language speakers at the Federal Bureau of Investigations (FBI) hindered criminal prosecutions. Additionally, diplomatic and intelligence officials' inadequate language skills weakened the fight against terrorism and drug trafficking, and resulted in less effective representation of U.S. interests abroad.

In June 2009, GAO found that the Department of Defense (DoD) had made progress on increasing its language capabilities, but lacked a comprehensive strategic plan and standardized methodology to identify language requirements, which made it difficult for DoD to assess the risk to its ability to conduct operations.

Additionally, this Subcommittee held a hearing on a 2009 GAO report finding that almost one-third of all State Department positions abroad are filled by Foreign Service Officers (FSO) who do not meet the job's language requirements. In particular, it troubles me is that 73 percent of FSOs serving in Afghanistan and 57 percent serving in Iraq do not meet the language proficiency requirements of their positions.

Today, GAO is releasing a report that finds that the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) has done little to understand its foreign language capabilities. DHS cannot identify its language shortfalls and does not know how these shortfalls impact its ability to meet the Department's mission.

After the attacks of September 11th, Congress and the Administration took action to address language shortages. I fear that these efforts, while helpful, are not enough to meet this pressing need, and that we are failing to create a long-term solution to the Nation's foreign language demands.

I firmly believe that without sustained leadership and a coordinated effort among federal agencies, state and local governments, the private sector, and academia, language shortfalls will continue to undermine our country's national security, economic growth, and other priorities. We need to be more proactive in addressing this issue.

I introduced the National Foreign Language Coordination Act to implement key recommendations from the 2004 National Language Conference. This bill would establish a National Foreign Language Coordination Council, chaired by a National Language Advisor, to develop a national foreign language strategy that is comprehensive, integrated across agencies, and addresses both long-term and short-term needs. This Council would provide the sustained leadership needed to address foreign language shortfalls in government as well as academia and the private sector.

The Bush Administration's National Security Language Initiative was a good first step toward coordinating efforts among the Departments of Defense, Education, and State, and the Intelligence Community to address our national security language needs. However, we must do more and expand this effort.

I look forward to hearing from our witnesses on how the Departments of Homeland Security and Defense are addressing their language needs and exploring short-term and long-term solutions to increase the number of foreign language speakers in the Federal government.

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