

STATEMENT OF CHAIRMAN DANIEL K. AKAKA

A National Security Crisis: Foreign Language Capabilities in the Federal Government

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

Aloha, I want to welcome our witnesses to today's hearing: *A National Security Crisis: Foreign Language Capabilities in the Federal Government*.

As Chairman of this Subcommittee, I have held seven oversight hearings that emphasized the need to build the Federal government's foreign language skills, from developing a foreign language strategy to improving U.S. diplomatic readiness. This is my final hearing on this topic.

Today, we will review the importance of foreign languages to our national security and our economy. We will also examine the state of the Federal government's foreign language capabilities and consider ways to improve our nation's language capacity.

Last year, we marked the 10th anniversary of the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks. This tragic event exposed our nation's language shortfalls. The 9/11 Commission raised concerns about the shortage of personnel with needed Middle Eastern language skills at both the Federal Bureau of Investigation and the Central Intelligence Agency, which hindered our understanding of the threat. These agencies, as well as the Departments of State, Homeland Security, and Defense continue to experience shortages of people skilled in hard-to-learn languages due to a limited pool of Americans to recruit from. Because of these shortages, agencies are forced to fill language-designated positions with employees that do not have those skills. Agencies then have to spend extra time and funds training employees in these languages.

As U.S. businesses of all sizes look to expand, they need employees with the foreign language skills and cultural knowledge to access overseas markets. Our national and economic security is closely linked to how well our schools prepare students to succeed in a global environment. Experts indicate that learning languages starting at the K-12 levels develop higher language proficiency than those starting in college.

The Federal government must partner with schools, colleges, and the private sector to address this ongoing challenge at its root cause: our nation's failure to adequately invest in language education, starting at early ages.

Even in a difficult budget environment, we must fund important international education and foreign language study programs to build the pipeline to a 21st century workforce, including the Foreign Language Assistance Program. We must make sure that budget cuts are not at the expense of strategic

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national security interests. Short-sighted cuts, for example to the Department of Education's Title VI program, could severely undermine the progress we have made in this area.

Today, we will hear about agencies' progress on their language capabilities. However, I believe agencies can do more to coordinate and share best practices in recruiting, retaining, and training personnel. Furthermore, I strongly believe that a coordinated national effort among all levels of government, industry, and academia is needed to tackle the problem before us. If we work together, we can improve our nation's language capacity and effectively confront the challenges to our nation's security and economic prosperity.

I look forward to hearing from our witnesses and continuing the discussion on how we can address our nation's language needs.

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