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United States Senate

COMMITTEE ON
HOMELAND SECURITY AND GOVERNMENTAL AFFAIRS

WASHINGTON, DC 20510-6250

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January 31, 2014

The Honorable Gene L. Dodaro
Comptroller General of the United States
U.S. Government Accountability Office
441 G Street, NW
Washington, DC 20548

Dear Mr. Dodaro:

As part of the Subcommittee's oversight of federal spending, I am writing to request that the Government Accountability Office (GAO) review the oversight of the Oak Ridge Institute for Science and Education (ORISE) fellowship program.

The fellowship program came to my attention as the Subcommittee was preparing for a hearing on POW/MIA accounting. At the hearing, I learned that the Joint Prisoner of War/Missing in Action Accounting Command (JPAC), a component of the Department of Defense, relies heavily on ORISE fellows to accomplish its mission.¹ The ORISE program is a Department of Energy (DOE) program managed under a contract held by the Oak Ridge Associated Universities (ORAU), a non-profit corporation. One mission of ORISE is to bring advancement in a variety of scientific, health and emergency management fields by placing fellows with various federal agencies.²

The Subcommittee's review of ORISE fellows at JPAC has raised concerns about the management and oversight of the ORISE fellowship program. The Subcommittee has learned that the stipend for fellows varies wildly, and does not seem to be tied to any metrics or standards. Also, the overhead costs associated with the program appear to be quite high, varying from 14%-18%. In addition, although ORISE has requirements for admittance into the program, including holding a degree in a science, technology, engineering or math field and having received that degree in the past five years, it appears that these requirements are sometimes waived at the request of agencies. Finally, it is unclear which entity, DOE, ORAU or the employing agency, has oversight over the fellows while they are working for the federal agency.

¹ Senate Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee, Subcommittee on Financial and Contracting Oversight, *Hearing on POW-MIA Accounting*, 113th Cong. (Aug. 1, 2013).

² Letter from Harry Anderson Page, President, Oak Ridge Associated Universities to Chairman Claire McCaskill (Oct. 3, 2013).

To better understand the oversight of the fellowship program and the costs associated with hiring fellows, I request that GAO review cost and oversight of the ORISE fellowship program. I specifically request that GAO address the following questions:

- (1) How do the costs to agencies that use the program compare with other similar federally-sponsored programs?
- (2) How often, and under what circumstances and process, do federal agencies request that ORISE program requirements be waived?
- (3) Are federal agencies using ORISE fellows as a substitute for hiring federal employees?
- (4) How do the stipends, including benefits and tax liabilities, for ORISE fellows compare across agencies, and how do they compare with General Schedule salaries?
- (5) Which entity (DOE, ORAU, or the employing agency) is responsible for oversight of ORISE fellows, including hiring and termination authority, day-to-day supervision, and general management issues?
- (6) What employment rights, including discrimination protections and Equal Opportunity rights, whistleblower protections, and other similar protections, do fellows have?

Please contact Sarah Garcia with Subcommittee staff at (202) 224-5602 with any questions. Please send any official correspondence relating to this request to the Subcommittee's clerk at kelsey_stroud@hsgac.senate.gov.

Sincerely,



Claire McCaskill
Chairman
Subcommittee on Financial and
Contracting Oversight

cc: Ron Johnson
Ranking Member
Subcommittee on Financial and
Contracting Oversight