

**STATEMENT
OF
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**BEFORE
SUBCOMMITTEE ON OVERSIGHT OF GOVERNMENT
MANAGEMENT, THE FEDERAL WORKFORCE, AND THE DISTRICT
OF COLUMBIA
SENATE COMMITTEE ON HOMELAND SECURITY
AND GOVERNMENTAL AFFAIRS**

**HEARING
ON
A REVIEW OF DIPLOMATIC READINESS: ADDRESSING THE
STAFFING AND FOREIGN LANGUAGE CHALLENGES FACING THE
FOREIGN SERVICE**

SEPTEMBER 24, 2009

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for this opportunity to appear before you today to address the Department of State's efforts to meet the staffing and foreign language challenges we face as we strive to meet our nation's foreign policy objectives. I appreciate your interest in the issues raised by the two GAO reports we are considering today, "Additional Steps Needed to Address Continuing Staffing and Experience Gaps at Hardship Posts" and "Comprehensive Plan Needed to Address Persistent Foreign Language Shortfalls". We worked closely with the GAO teams, over a period of months, and welcome their recommendations.

The Bureau of Human Resources (HR) has the critical responsibility of strengthening American diplomacy through our people. Our principal task is ensuring that we have the right people with the right skills in the right place at the right time. We are grateful that Congress has appropriated funds in the last several years to improve our ability to accomplish this mission in a highly dynamic global environment. I am confident that these resources have set us on the right path to address the diplomatic challenges of today and tomorrow. That said, we have much catching up to do, as reflected in some of GAO's findings.

The last decade has been marked by the growing number of global threats to our security, including international terrorism and crime, trafficking in narcotics and persons, and pandemics that thrive on the inability of failed and failing states to perform even basic sovereign responsibilities. Managing these threats depends as much on strengthening states and societies as on defeating enemies. We know that we must continue to reach out beyond the embassy to influence public opinion and expand our diplomatic presence where our interests are most at stake. Therefore, we have increased the number of positions at difficult, potentially dangerous posts that are essential to our foreign policy objectives. We have also increased the language-designated positions by one-third since 2002.

While our mission has grown consistently over the past 10 years; our staffing has not kept pace. As a result, we have had to make difficult decisions repositioning global staff from one region to another; deciding which positions to fill and which to leave vacant; choosing whether to leave a position empty for the months it takes to train a fully language-qualified officer or curtail part or

all of the language training. These have not been easy choices. We prioritized – as dictated by our foreign policy goals. As a result, we have fully staffed high priority posts such as Afghanistan and Iraq, but have not been able to meet all the needs of other posts, or even some of our Washington headquarters.

Fortunately, that is beginning to change. With the additional hiring authorized by Congress, we launched Diplomacy 3.0 in March 2009 and expect to bring on board 1,200 new Foreign Service and Civil Service employees above attrition in fiscal year 2009. With your continued support, we will hire another 1,200 more in fiscal year 2010. The increase of over 2,400 positions in fiscal years 2009 and 2010 goes a long way to achieving our goal of having the right people with the right skills in the right places at the right time. Regarding the Foreign Service, the increase of almost 1,500 in 2009 and 2010 provides a significant step to achieving Secretary Clinton's goal to increase the size of the Foreign Service by 25%. Our HR professionals are working to ensure that these new employees will be fully prepared to meet the challenges at hand, and trained to pursue their work as effectively as possible. As these much-needed new hires, and those yet to come, are trained and able to move into positions, the system should come into alignment and the gaps in diplomatic staffing should be reduced. That is our goal and, I am sure, yours as well.

Many of the issues raised by the GAO are directly related to these staffing shortages. The additional staffing levels enables us to fill vacancies at posts as well as ensure our employees can complete the training – language, tradecraft, and other job-related – they need to most effectively fulfill our mission.

Staffing Hardship Posts

Approximately two-thirds of our Foreign Service posts are now designated as hardship posts, a considerable increase from 32 years ago when I joined the Foreign Service. In addition, more than 900 positions are designated as “unaccompanied” or “limited accompanied” for reasons of hardship or danger – an increase from just 200 such positions in 2001.

With insufficient numbers of officers to fully staff all of our posts, we have had to prioritize which positions to fill and which to leave vacant. This deliberative process, based on our foreign policy priorities, has resulted in full staffing in our most critical posts – which include Iraq, Afghanistan, and Pakistan – and shortages elsewhere, including at hardship posts.

GAO has recommended that our positions should be filled by employees at the designated grade level and we agree. However, this has not always been possible. We have a particularly acute staffing gap at our mid-level Generalist grades that resulted from several successive years of hiring rates well below attrition in the mid-1990s, particularly at USIA in the public diplomacy area before State integration. We expect the gap to significantly lessen by 2012 as the 1,474 Foreign Service generalist employees brought in under the Diplomatic Readiness Initiative between FY 2002 and 2004 move into the mid-level positions. In the interim, we are better capitalizing on the significant number of our entry-level employees who are on their second or third professional career. They bring a wealth of experience that, together with several years of Foreign Service background, may enable them to fill stretch positions. For example, we have a former Army colonel who had served as a Defense Attaché and whose previous experience in the military and in our embassies overseas made him a perfect fit for a key political-military assignment in Iraq. Similarly, a former oil executive's understanding of "oil economics" allowed him to quickly provide critical support first on the Iraq desk and subsequently in the field. Likewise, a former immigration attorney may be well-suited to a mid-level consular position where fraud is a serious concern, or a former NGO project manager could be an excellent fit in a position that is engaged in foreign assistance, working closely with local government officials. When this synergy occurs, both the employee and diplomatic readiness benefit.

We value service at hardship posts, and I am proud to say that our dedicated employees continue to step forward. To encourage and support that service, we are thinking creatively. Eligibility to receive student loan repayments, extra pay to serve an additional year or two, and the possibility of professional level employment for qualified family members are among the incentives we have made available in conjunction with an assignment to certain hardship posts, in addition to the usual hardship/danger pay differentials.

We agree with GAO that we can better assess the impact of our individual incentives and allowances and are seeking more effective methods to do so. I would like to emphasize, however, that many of these incentives may not be quantifiable. As someone who spent the majority of my career in hardship posts, I can attest to the allure of the work, the challenges, and the opportunity to make a difference that are unique to many of our hardship posts. We should not overlook the role that these factors play in employee decisions.

We appreciate that GAO has acknowledged our success in staffing Afghanistan and Iraq, two unaccompanied posts that are among our highest foreign policy priorities. These assignments, together with the addition of Pakistan in the current assignment cycle, are made during a separate “season” and volunteers continue to answer the call to service.

Meeting our Foreign Language Needs

Sustaining the Department’s high standards for foreign language capability—always a crucial component of our diplomatic readiness—has become increasingly challenging. New policy priorities require our employees to enhance their levels of proficiency in languages, such as Arabic and Chinese, which involve at least two years of study to achieve a professional level of fluency. Moreover, the number of language designated positions (LDPs) has increased by 33% since 2002 and, we believe, will continue to rise. I am also looking at how best to build professional level proficiency in those who already have a solid foundation.

The Foreign Service Institute (FSI) has expanded its foreign language training capacity to meet this demand and to raise the proficiency of existing foreign language speakers, particularly those staffing our new public diplomacy hubs. Enrollments in full-time Arabic language courses, for example, have almost doubled since 2004. FSI uses domestic and overseas immersion opportunities to supplement classroom training. In addition, to meet increased demand, FSI is also running a two-shift schedule and expanding on-line offerings.

More targeted recruiting can also help address the current challenges, and we are recruiting aggressively for certain critical language proficiency skills at this time. Those with these language proficiencies who pass our stringent Foreign Service Officer written exam are given preference points in the hiring process. Through this program, we have hired over 400 officers since 2004. For current employees, we have incentivized hard and super-hard languages such as Chinese, Pashto and Hindi. Such incentives underscore the value placed by the Department on obtaining capacity in our most challenging and needed languages.

We agree with the GAO conclusion that the Department should link all of its efforts to meet foreign language requirements. HR and FSI recently have formed a working group to develop options. The Department remains committed to supporting our foreign policy priorities by developing robust foreign language skills.

Conclusion

It seems appropriate that we are reviewing these two GAO reports together – they demonstrate that today’s foreign policy requires us to expand our resources in numerous new directions simultaneously. While we work aggressively to recruit and retain the talented staff needed in places like Afghanistan and Iraq, we also must ensure that our workforce has the skills necessary to be successful in these challenging environments.

The men and women of the State Department are answering their nation’s call to service. They are doing tough jobs in remote areas of the world, and putting their lives at risk for the American people. Secretary Clinton and I are justifiably proud of their record of service, and we are committed to ensuring that they receive all of the training, resources, and support they need to succeed in their important work. Further progress toward Diplomacy 3.0 will allow us to continue to address the shortages created by the policy priorities of recent years. We will continue to strive to staff all of our high priority positions with officers who are ready to communicate with their host country counterparts and otherwise further our mission in the best possible ways.

Mr. Chairman, I thank you for the opportunity to address you today and I would be happy to answer your questions.