

Prepared Statement

of

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Deputy Under Secretary of Defense

(Civilian Personnel Policy)

Before the

Oversight and Investigations Subcommittee

House Armed Services Committee

**“Benefits and Medical Care Offered to Civilian Employees Deployed to Iraq
and Afghanistan”**

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INTRODUCTION

Mr. Chairman and Subcommittee members thank you for the invitation to be here today. I appreciate this opportunity to discuss the Department of Defense (DOD) views on medical care coverage for injured deployed civilians and to highlight the various benefits and incentives available to Federal civilian employees who volunteer to serve in Iraq and Afghanistan. DOD civilian employees have a long and proud history of serving with and supporting our military members. Today, our civilian workforce is transforming into one that is more global and expeditionary to meet the Department's 21st century mission requirements.

Since 2001, we have had approximately 1,500 DOD civilian employees deployed to Afghanistan and over 6,000 civilian employees to Iraq. Currently, we have approximately 300 civilian employees serving in Afghanistan and 1,750 in Iraq. These brave civilians are working side-by-side with our military members in support of our national security mission. These employees fill a variety of support positions in the fields of Accounting and Budget, logistics, Equipment maintenance and repair, information technology, intelligence, and foreign languages. Most recently, working with the State Department, we developed and led an initiative to use a capabilities-based approach to meeting Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRTs) requirements. Civilian employees volunteered for assignments on the PRTs based upon skills and capabilities not inherent in their current positions. Typically, civilians are deployed based on their position

responsibilities. The Department had well over a thousand resumes from DoD civilians who were willing and available to help in the rebuilding of Iraq.

Under the Department's current authority, the Department can deploy DoD civilian employees to hostile or combat areas based upon their position responsibilities. Positions that require the added responsibilities of serving with U.S. Forces when all other personnel have been evacuated are designated as Emergency-Essential (E-E). Positions are announced with the E-E requirements and employees sign statements agreeing to the terms of the position requirements before they are hired. In circumstances where a position is identified as E-E after someone is hired, the incumbent is provided advance notice of the requirement, and if necessary, assistance in locating a non-EE position. Although the Department has the authority to forward deploy DoD civilians based upon their position responsibilities, DoD civilian employees generally apply for or volunteer for such opportunities. These employees contribute their talent to joint, integrated national security mission requirements.

We have learned from focus group sessions the reasons why our employees volunteer for this type of assignments. The reasons vary from a desire to serve our Country, witness results on the ground, and engage in this type of mission-focused work. They state that it is an honor and a privilege to serve our Country and to support our war fighters through such deployments.

In return, our DOD civilians bring back broadened perspectives, critical experiences, and a deeper understanding of their role in support of DoD's expanding missions. The men and women who answer this call are making a critical difference in the support of the Department's U.S. Forces, interagency and coalition partners.

INCENTIVES TO SERVE

Thanks to you, the Congress, we have also been able to offer additional financial incentives to our Federal civilian employees serving in Iraq and Afghanistan. Deployed civilians assigned into the United States Central Command or CENTCOM area of responsibility, as part of their compensation package, receive a 35 percent Danger Pay allowance, a 35 percent Foreign Post Differential, and coverage by the increased premium pay limitation of \$212,100.

In addition, I also want to thank the Congress for passage last year of Public Law 109-234, Section 1063, which authorized agencies, through Fiscal Year 2008, to provide allowances, benefits, and gratuities comparable to those provided to members of its Foreign Service. These included such benefits as an enhanced death gratuity travel, home leave, and rest and recuperation breaks.

Additionally, employees serving in Iraq and Afghanistan for 30 consecutive days or 60 non-consecutive days are eligible for the Secretary of Defense Global War on Terrorism (GWOT) medal. This medal is a campaign

medal and was created to recognize and honor the contributions of our DoD civilians in direct support of the Department's contingency operations. Those who pay the ultimate sacrifice and are injured or killed in theater may be eligible to receive the Defense of Freedom medal. This medal is the civilian equivalent of the military's Purple Heart.

MEDICAL SCREENING AND CARE FOR DEPLOYED CIVILIANS

As the Department's DoD civilian support expanded in theaters of operation, policies have been implemented to provide injured DoD deployed civilian employees pre and post deployment assessments, prompt and professional medical treatment, both in theater and upon their return to the United States. Last year the Department updated and re-published DoD Instruction 6490.03, "Deployment Health". This instruction requires that the DOD Components execute a comprehensive deployment health program. This Specifically, the instruction outlines health protection requirements for DOD civilians who deploy and is consistent with the requirements for deploying military personnel. This regulation requires essential pre- and post-deployment health assessments. These processes include mental health assessments. Further our policies require that the scope of care provided shall be equivalent to that received by our active duty military personnel.

Prior to deploying, DOD civilian employees are required to obtain a physical examination. The purpose of this examination is to determine the

presence of any nondeployable medical condition which is identified by the Combatant Commands along with required immunizations. These employee records are reviewed as part of our civilian employee's pre-deployment processing. If any nondeployable medical condition is identified during this review, the employee is not permitted to deploy. These records provide a baseline for the medical screen that is conducted upon the employee's return from deployment.

Regrettably, our employees are not immune to the dangers associated with some of these global and expeditionary assignments. To date, in Iraq we have had 116 employee injuries and seven deaths. Currently we have four claims for Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder and two claims for traumatic brain injury that have been accepted by the Department of Labor, Office of Workers Compensation Program.

Approximately half of the reported injuries involved no loss of work time or medical expenses beyond the initial injury and medical treatment. The remaining half of injured employees (those with reported lost work time and those who required additional medical procedures) were assigned a Department of Labor nurse case manager to assist in coordinating the health care requirements.

Any civilian employee injured in theater receives immediate medical attention equitant to our military members. Deployed civilians who were treated

in theater continue to be eligible for treatment in an MTF or private sector medical facility upon their return to the U.S. for compensable illnesses, diseases, wounds or injuries under the Department of Labor (DoL) Office of Workers' Compensation (OWC) Programs. This care is provided at no cost to employees. Additionally, deployed DoD civilians who later identify compensable illnesses, diseases, wounds or injuries under the Department of Labor Worker Compensation programs are eligible for treatment in an MTF or private sector medical facility at no cost them. The DOL program also provides coverage for lost wages and death benefits for surviving spouses and dependents.

Furthermore, DOD policy mandates that federal civilian employees returning from a deployment to a military contingency operation must be scheduled for a face-to-face health assessment with a trained health care provider within 30 days after returning to home or to the processing station. This assessment must include a discussion of mental health or psychosocial issues commonly associated with deployments. These employees are required to have a reassessment within 90-180 days after return to home station.

GAO REVIEW OF MEDICAL CARE FOR DEPLOYED CIVILIAN EMPLOYEES

GAO conducted a review in September 2006 of the medical and health protections for deployed DOD civilians. Their sample of seven DOD cases revealed that DOD civilians had received treatment in accordance with DOD

policies. Notwithstanding these findings, there are one case where a series of mistakes were made. One of those cases involved a Department of the Army employee who was one of the early employees injured in Iraq. After receiving medical treatment at an MTF, and being MEDEVACed to the United States, he was initially denied medical treatment at a MTF. This was inconsistent with the Department's policies. However, we learned that these policies are sometimes not known or well-understood. The Department acknowledges the difficulties that this Army employee encountered. My staff and I have been personally working with the Department of the Army officials, at the highest levels, to resolve the issues and concerns. The Department is taking deliberate steps to communicate these policies more clearly and broadly on a regular and recurring basis.

The Department is committed to providing the best possible care to its injured DoD military and civilian employees who have made great sacrifices for our Nation. This particular case highlighted the need to further improve the communication, management, and coordination of medical care for our civilian employees. As soon as the Department became aware of his circumstances, the Department took immediate steps to resolve them. As a result, of these early errors, we have been working on improving the policies for deployed civilians as well as the their communication.

CONCLUSION

In summary, our civilian employees play an integral role in supporting our military members around the globe. We are proud of our brave men and women who volunteer for these type of assignments. The Department is working to ensure that the compensation and benefits for their service is fair and equitable. We are reviewing and updating our guidance regarding medical care for our deployed civilian employees and taking steps to correct our early mistakes, and to clarify and disseminate our policies. Thank you for the opportunity to present our views on the medical care coverage for injured deployed civilians and to highlight the various benefits and incentives available to Federal civilians who volunteer to work to Iraq and Afghanistan. I look forward to your questions.