

Senate Democratic Policy Committee Hearing
**“Contractor Misconduct and the Electrocution Deaths
of American Soldiers in Iraq”**

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My name is Rachel McNeill. I am from Madison, Wisconsin and I have been in the Army Reserves since 2002. I served in Iraq as a heavy construction equipment operator with the 983rd Engineer Battalion from January through December of 2005.

The first soldiers from my company flew into Camp Speicher from Kuwait in mid-January 2005 while the rest of us continued to armor our vehicles and load our construction equipment onto civilian trucks for transport. A week later, soldiers from our company left to convoy into Iraq. A few days later, I flew into Camp Speicher.

When I arrived, my platoon had already moved out of tents and into our housing area. Most of our battalion lived in three to five bedroom houses. All females in our company shared two houses. To the soldiers on base, our worn down living quarters were affectionately known as the “crack houses.” Despite the name, all of the houses had electricity in them and most had indoor plumbing, including faucets, a shower and a water heater.

KBR was the contractor responsible for maintenance and repairs in the housing area. They stopped daily to refill the water tank that was located in the front yard of our house. Once the tank had been filled, we turned on the water pump with a switch and moved the water from that tank in the yard to the one on the roof of our house. Once the water was pumped into the water tank on the roof, the switch to the pump was turned off.

But from the start, there were problems with the systems supposedly maintained by KBR. The water heater would randomly shoot steaming hot water onto the sidewalk and into our back yard. I was told by the other women in my group to use the shower in the other female house, because they had been shocked in the shower in our house from the time they had first moved in. They said that while the water was on, they had been jolted by electricity.

I do not know whether the engineer unit that occupied the house before our unit had the same problem when they were using the shower. However, the previous occupants did tell us that it was more efficient to try and fix any problems ourselves. KBR had a reputation for taking a long time to address repairs. So we learned that it made sense to submit a work order to KBR only when there were major problems that we couldn't fix ourselves.

In this situation, an electrician from another platoon came over to the house to determine why the shower was shocking the soldiers when they used it. It turned out that it was an easy fix – the soldier said that our water heater simply needed to be grounded. The entire repair took less than a half hour to complete.

An easy fix – yet we couldn't rely on KBR to take care of it in a timely way, or to find the problem in an inspection before we moved in. If we had submitted a work order to KBR to fix the problem, who knows how much longer we would have waited, or how many more soldiers would have been unnecessarily shocked in the showers? Who knows whether a member of my group would have been seriously injured or even killed?

I also remember the electrician who fixed the grounding saying that it wasn't the first house to have the problem in our company area. It seems that we weren't the only ones suffering from KBR's lack of responsiveness to the needs of soldiers in Iraq.

By the way, after the electrician from our neighboring platoon fixed the problem, no one else was shocked that I am aware of.

In December 2005, our battalion returned to the United States. Not long after our return, I came across a story about a Green Beret who died of electrocution in a shower in Iraq because of an improperly grounded water pump.

I am here today because I believe our men and women overseas deserve better. There is no reason that someone fighting for our country should be exposed to such a risk. In the military, safety is always a priority. Steps are taken to minimize risks wherever possible. In my experience with contractors, however, safety often seems to be an afterthought.

There needs to be much greater oversight on the basic services provided by contractors like KBR. In my opinion, the electrocutions and electrical shocks of soldiers are not just isolated incidents; they are the tip of the iceberg when it comes to a lack of responsibility by contractors. Contractors need to uphold the same standards of safety that the military does if they are responsible for services as vital and basic as food, water and shelter for our troops.

Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today. I would be happy to answer any questions you may have.