

**Report and Recommendations of the House Armed Services Subcommittee on  
Oversight and Investigations  
in Support of the Readiness Subcommittee re:  
The Defense Travel System  
September 2010**

**INTRODUCTION**

The Department of Defense (DOD) currently spends about \$10.4 billion per year in direct costs for travel.<sup>1</sup> Managing this immense budget has been a challenge, and 1,000 pages of rules (both legislatively and regulation-driven) have further hampered efforts to streamline the process for users of Defense travel. In 1995, DOD began an effort to create one process to book and reimburse such travel, and its automated Defense Travel System (DTS) began operation in 1998. Nearly ten years after its inception, the system is still plagued by developmental problems, operational test failures, premature deployments, functionality problems, low usage, and general user dissatisfaction.<sup>2</sup>

The Subcommittee has been conducting oversight of defense travel since 2008, and it held hearings both in April of that year and in April of 2009. Both hearings resulted in Items of Special Interest (ISI's) in the FY 2009 and FY 2010 National Defense Authorization Acts (NDAA).<sup>3</sup> In addition the Government Accountability Office (GAO) has examined the performance of DTS in several reports.<sup>4</sup> The Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations most recently held a follow-up hearing on April 27, 2010 to receive testimony regarding DOD efforts to streamline and simplify all travel conducted under its purview. This hearing attempted to assess the extent to which the Defense Travel Management Office (DTMO), which has jurisdiction over Defense travel, has implemented both GAO's recommendations and the recommendations in the ISI's.

**DTS AS PART OF DEFENSE TRAVEL SIMPLIFICATION**

Both witnesses at the 2010 hearing, Mr. David Fisher, the director of the Business Transformation Agency, and Ms. Pamela Mitchell, director of the Defense Travel Management Office, argued that improvements to DTS are also linked to improving, or simplifying, the entire defense travel system. DTS itself is just a computer-based tool to facilitate compliance with regulations and laws while enabling initiation, completion, and reimbursement of official travel. Therefore, any changes that would simplify the travel requirements would in turn make their automation via DTS easier. The challenge is very complex, involving both requirements mandated by statute and requirements imposed by DOD regulations. The complexity is reflected

---

<sup>1</sup> Defense Travel Management Office, "Defense Travel Simplification," *Briefing to HASC O&I Staff*, 23 February 2010 (Briefing slides available in Committee files).

<sup>2</sup> Government Accountability Office, *Defense Travel System: Implementation Challenges Remain*, June 2009.

<sup>3</sup> National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2009 and National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2010, sec. 1058.

<sup>4</sup> U.S. Government Accountability Office, *Defense Travel*, GAO-08-342, March 2008.

in the more than 76 types of travel that must be addressed, some of which are specifically required by law.

### **STATUS OF DTS TECHNICAL IMPROVEMENTS**

GAO initiated a study in 2006 to find ways to improve DTS for both the user of the system and the Department. Its analysis led to 14 recommendations, which centered on testing the system, rules governing premium-class travel, maintaining records on the amount of travel booked outside of DTS (i.e., legacy travel systems), refunding the Department for unused tickets, simplifying the computer displays, utilizing restricted (non-refundable) airfares where possible, increasing automation of the process, and fixing the instances where DTS displayed travel options that were not compliant with relevant rules.

When it reviewed the DTS again in 2009, GAO found that only 6 of its 14 recommendations had been implemented. At the time GAO maintained that eight recommendations were either insufficiently acted upon or postponed, and the optimization of DTS was incomplete. When asked directly about the status of GAO's findings, Mr. Fisher replied that "It would be fair to say that we have a disagreement as to what currently remains open and what is closed."<sup>5</sup> GAO will formally review DOD's progress later this year.

In addition, the Department argued that many of the flaws still found within DTS were perceived usability problems, or lack of "user-friendliness." Mr. Fisher addressed this issue directly in the hearing by citing a DOD survey: "What our [military and civilian DOD] members are telling us is that 80 to 85 percent of our folks do not find DTS to be difficult or very difficult..." but "DTS is not an intuitive tool. Most software are not intuitive tools. But the Department, through some training, through usage, has become proficient in using this tool."<sup>6</sup> Usability is inherently difficult to define and despite the cited survey results, there continue to be anecdotal instances of poor usability problems. This is one of the items that GAO will assess in their follow-up work.

### **STATUS OF DEFENSE SIMPLIFICATION**

Both witnesses maintained that the DTS was implementing an unnecessarily cumbersome travel policy, driven both by statute and internal DOD regulations: "We are about 100 times as complex as industry is for travel management rules, and that makes it very difficult to modernize and create that intuitive user-friendly tool."<sup>7</sup> In fact, Congress had already required that the Department produce a report on Defense Travel Simplification on or before December 31,

---

<sup>5</sup> HASC O&I Hearing entitled, "Simplifying Defense Travel: Reviewing Progress on Improving the Defense Travel System for the User," 27 April 2010.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Mr. Fisher's oral statement for the HASC O&I Hearing entitled, "Simplifying Defense Travel: Reviewing Progress on Improving the Defense Travel System for the User," 27 April 2010.

2009.<sup>8</sup> This report was delivered on May 24, 2010 and discusses a “multi-pronged, incremental approach over multiple years.”<sup>9</sup> The witnesses proposed a three-phased plan for defense travel simplification: (1) analysis of current and proposed rules and regulations; (2) model, validate, and pilot simplified processes; and, (3) implement changes.<sup>10</sup> The witnesses did not give a specific time-frame for the implementation of this plan, either in their report or in their responses to the Questions for the Record.

Both witnesses also stressed that the myriad of regulations governing DOD travel affect the cost of implementing DTS. However, it is unclear how many of these regulations were directed by law versus internally generated, despite the fact that Congress requested this information in the 2010 NDAA. This information was delivered after the April hearing, but not with sufficient time to analyze and incorporate into the 2011 version of the bill.

### **Recommendations**

1. HASC Subcommittees will continue to follow the status of discussions between the Government Accountability Office (GAO) and the Department of Defense on which GAO recommendations to address and which GAO findings are still outstanding.
2. The Department should revise regulations to streamline defense travel so that the Defense Travel System can be improved and cost effective.
3. The Department should provide a detailed Project Plan to Congress including timelines for implementing the Defense Travel Simplification Plan described in its June 2010 Report.

---

<sup>8</sup> *The National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2010*, Section 1058.

<sup>9</sup> The Department of Defense Report to Congress on Defense Travel Simplification, received 24 May 2010.

<sup>10</sup> Ms. Pamela Mitchell, Responses to Question for the Record for HASC O&I Hearing, “Simplifying Defense Travel: Reviewing Progress on Improving the Defense Travel System for the User,” CHARRTS No.: HASC OI-02-004, 27 April 2010.