

**STATEMENT OF AMBASSADOR STEVEN A. BROWNING
PRINCIPAL DEPUTY ASSISTANT SECRETARY
BUREAU OF HUMAN RESOURCES
DEPARTMENT OF STATE**

Before the

**SUBCOMMITTEE ON THE FEDERAL WORKFORCE, POSTAL SERVICE, AND
THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA
COMMITTEE ON OVERSIGHT AND GOVERNMENT REFORM
U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES**

On

**A CALL TO ARMS: A REVIEW OF BENEFITS FOR DEPLOYED FEDERAL
EMPLOYEES**

September 16, 2009

Chairman Lynch, Ranking Member Chaffetz, and Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for this opportunity to testify before you today. I appreciate your interest in the State Department's efforts – as well as those of our sister agencies, including USAID, to support our employees serving in dangerous and difficult places, including Afghanistan and Iraq. I look forward to sharing with you some of the concrete steps we have taken to address the critical needs of our employees and their families.

Under the leadership of Secretary Clinton, our dedicated men and women are working around the world to renew America's leadership through a diplomacy that, advances our interests, demonstrates our values, and enhances our security. They are doing inspiring work under increasingly difficult conditions. Currently, there are over 900 positions where no family members, or only certain categories of family members, may reside because of dangerous conditions or other severe hardships. In 2001, there were approximately 200 such positions. This steady increase in assignments to difficult and dangerous regions reflects the Department's concerted effort to send the Foreign Service wherever it is most needed.

Many of our colleagues have made the ultimate sacrifice while serving overseas. Just last week, members of the State Department family came together to remember Terry Barnich, a colleague lost last May when his vehicle struck an improvised explosive device (IED). Terry served in Anbar Province, one of the most dangerous places in Iraq, because he knew his job was critical to furthering our foreign policy there. The Department is committed to ensuring that dedicated employees like Mr. Barnich have all the support they need to carry out our important mission and we appreciate the support from Congress that makes it possible.

SUPPORTING SERVICE IN AFGHANISTAN AND IRAQ

The call to serve has been a hallmark of the Foreign Service. We have fully staffed our missions in Iraq and Afghanistan with volunteers who have stepped forward to serve in these highly dangerous, yet critical missions. In recognition of their service, we offer a broad package of benefits and incentives. This package has improved since when I served in Iraq in 2004 and 2005.

Let me share with you some of the benefits we now offer to our employees serving in Afghanistan and Iraq that other agencies may also be able to extend to agencies. Employees at both posts receive the maximum hardship and danger pay allowances, for a total of an additional 70% of an employee's basic pay. All employees except political appointees, Senior Foreign Service, and the Senior Executive Service receive overtime, or an equivalent payment, to compensate for the expected long hours that extend the work week far beyond 40 hours. Employees are also offered several Rest and Recuperation (R&R) trips during their one-year tours and can choose whether to return to the U.S. or take them in the region. We also offer administrative leave to facilitate employees' ability to take their R&R trips. With Congressional support, we were able to overcome two issues - the annual premium pay cap and the aggregate pay cap for eligible employees serving in Iraq and Afghanistan, both of which limit the amount of benefits an employee is able to receive.

Not all of our benefits are directly related to the pocketbook. We also instituted certain incentives that are specific to the Foreign Service such as enhancing an employee's opportunity to obtain a desirable follow-on assignment. Moreover, the medical and mental well-being of our employees is critical, as is support for their families during and after their assignments. To address those needs, we have expanded the medical services available pre-departure, at post, and after completion of the assignment and we expanded the scope of our Family Liaison Office to provide support to employees and family members during an unaccompanied tour.

**MEDICAL AND MENTAL HEALTH:
RESPONDING TO THE GROWING NEED BECAUSE OF HIGH STRESS POSTS**

The Department of State is operating under a new paradigm in managing diplomatic affairs and, as a result, our employees and their families are being exposed to stress during assignments similar, at times, to that experienced by military personnel. To build the capacity of our employees to recognize and handle that stress effectively, all employees assigned to Afghanistan and Iraq attend pre-departure training that familiarizes them with security issues unique to combat zone assignments, alerts them to the causes and the signs of stress-related conditions, and provides them with techniques for managing the stress of being in a war zone, as well as contacts they can reach out to if they feel that they are not able to cope with the pressure. Following any high stress assignment—including, but not limited to, those in Afghanistan and Iraq—the Foreign Service Institute conducts a mandatory “High Stress Outbrief” that helps employees recognize Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and offers a clinically validated questionnaire survey to assess the symptoms of PTSD.

Recognizing that more was needed, our Office of Medical Services (MED) established a Deployment Stress Management Program (DSMP) with a board-certified psychiatrist to serve as Director, two social workers and an administrative assistant. That small unit has a large task but, working with partners, strives to develop the resiliency of those assigned to high stress posts to help prevent psychological harm. This unit also promotes early detection of stress-related disorders and appropriate treatment.

The unit is not working alone. Additional mental health personnel have been assigned to the Health Units in Baghdad and Kabul, supported by our regional psychiatrists in Amman and New Delhi. They are tasked not only with providing strategies for coping with stress but also with providing ongoing assessments and treatment of our personnel.

Employees who are identified as possibly suffering from stress-related disorders and who require treatment that is not available locally are assigned to a six- to seven-week program of treatment conducted by MED. The goal of the program is to enable the majority of participants to take on a work assignment following the program. Those who require additional treatment are referred to the Office of Workers' Compensation Programs (OWCP). Among those deployed to combat zones, five employees have required treatment for PTSD under the Federal Employees' Compensation Act (FECA). All were diagnosed and treated before the establishment of our Deployment Stress Management Program (DSMP). Any such deployed employee who sustains physical or emotional injury in performance of duty may seek assistance from the State Department in filing a claim with OWCP; an injured employee would be entitled to a variety of FECA benefits including medical, wage loss and vocational rehabilitation benefits under the FECA program.

To support essential continued monitoring, we have developed an assessment system for Department of State employees who have served in combat zones to screen for PTSD through our Deployment Stress Management Program (DSMP).

**SUPPORT FOR EMPLOYEES AND THEIR FAMILIES:
AGHANISTAN, IRAQ AND OTHER UNACCOMPANIED POSTS**

With 18 posts around the world now designated by State as “unaccompanied” or “partially unaccompanied” posts, we are determined to create conditions and provide support services intended to minimize the difficulties employees invariably face when separated from

their families for extended periods. For instance, our Family Liaison Office (FLO) established dedicated positions for an Unaccompanied Tours (UT) Support Officer and an Unaccompanied Tours (UT) Program Specialist to work with our families while the employee is serving in an unaccompanied tour. FLO's UT Support Program provides a single point of contact for information, referrals, emotional support, and assistance through personal consultations, e-mails, newsletters, phone calls, print and online publications, and group briefings.

To help alleviate the stresses and strains of service at unaccompanied posts, we contracted with MHN (formerly Managed Health Network) to provide 24/7 access to a customized Web portal, telephone hotline, and face-to-face counseling sessions with a clinician for family members residing outside the Washington, D.C. area. To provide additional support to children, we developed individualized, age-appropriate handbooks to help State Department children understand and cope with the stress of having a parent serving on an unaccompanied tour. We are also continuing to provide medals and certificates of recognition to children of employees serving in unaccompanied posts. To assess and improve our programs, this fall we are surveying affected employees and family members to see how we can do even better.

LOOKING AHEAD

We are currently working with our colleagues at the Office of Personnel Management and the Department of Defense to examine the compensation benefits available to deployed civilians to ensure that it meets our needs for recruiting and retention. If changes are needed, the Administration will put forth a comprehensive proposal to address the issues identified, with the goal of regularizing authorities across the agencies. This interagency process has made considerable progress and we look forward to working with Congress to support federal civilian employees serving in zones of armed conflict.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

In conclusion, Mr. Chairman, we believe that our employees and their families deserve comprehensive support before, during, and after their overseas assignments. The need is particularly great for those serving at our most difficult and dangerous posts. The Department has worked hard to provide benefits and programs that support our employees, but we recognize that our work may never be truly done as we adapt to a changing world. Our employees deserve nothing but the best because that is what they give to our country.

Thank you for providing me with this opportunity to appear before you and the members of the subcommittee.