



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
November 13, 2007

Contact: Jesse Broder Van Dyke
(202) 224-6361

**Statement of Senator Daniel K. Akaka
"Human Capital Needs of the U.S. Customs and Border Protection
'One Face at the Border' Initiative"
Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs
Subcommittee on Oversight of Government Management,
the Federal Workforce, and the District of Columbia**

WASHINGTON, DC – U.S. Senator Daniel K. Akaka (D-HI), Chairman of the Subcommittee on Oversight of Government Management, the Federal Workforce, and the District of Columbia, held an oversight hearing today to examine the results of a Government Accountability Office (GAO) report entitled: *Border Security: Despite Progress, Weaknesses in Traveler Inspections Exist at Our Nation's Ports of Entry* (GAO-08-219).

Witnesses at today's hearing included the Mr. Paul Morris, Executive Director, Admissibility Passenger Programs Office of Field Operations, U.S. Customs and Border Protection; Mr. Richard Stana, Director, Homeland Security and Justice Issues, Government Accountability Office; and Ms. Colleen Kelley, President, National Treasury Employees Union.

The following is Senator Akaka's opening statement for the hearing:

Today's hearing — Human Capital Needs of the U.S. Customs and Border Protection "One Face at the Border" Initiative — will examine the results of a Government Accountability Office (GAO) report entitled: Border Security: Despite Progress, Weaknesses in Traveler Inspections Exist at Our Nation's Ports of Entry (GAO-08-219). The GAO report details troubling shortcomings in inspections by Customs and Border Protection (CBP) at land and air ports of entry.

Each year, CBP processes more than 400 million pedestrian and passenger entries, as well as 20 million containers with goods, into the United States through 326 official ports of entry. The vast majority of visitors to the United States come here legally for tourism, business, work, studies, or other activities. But, the GAO report makes clear that thousands of people each year are entering the country illegally through official ports of entry.

I requested that GAO do this study because I was concerned that CBP was not hiring enough officers to screen travelers at ports of entry, and that CBP officers were not receiving the training they need to do their jobs properly. This report reinforces my concerns.

GAO investigators who visited border crossings found CBP officers missing from their inspection booths at some locations. At other locations, officers failed to ask investigators for their identification or travel documents. GAO investigators also saw video of CBP officers waiving vehicles through inspection booths without speaking with the passengers. In short, CBP at times conducts inspections that are unlikely to detect people and goods that should not enter the country.

Insufficient staffing and training seem to be the central reasons for these inadequate inspections. CBP simply does not have anywhere near enough CBP officers working at ports of entry, and officers are not provided the training they need to effectively do their jobs. CBP's own staffing model indicates that the agency needs to hire several thousand additional CBP officers. Staffing shortages force CBP to cut back on important homeland security functions, such as deploying canine teams that can detect explosive materials, drugs, currency, and even smuggled humans or agricultural products.

Because of staffing shortfalls, CBP officers are being forced to work extensive overtime, sometimes 16 hour shifts. It is not realistic to expect an officer to stay as alert and focused as needed for 16 hours straight. Long overtime also leads to CBP officers calling in sick from exhaustion, worsening the staffing shortages.

CBP has made progress in improving its training programs, but staffing shortages have forced the agency to cut back on its training. New officers at land border crossings are supposed to receive 12 weeks of basic, on-the-job training when they start. However, most CBP officers receive less than that, and some receive as little as two weeks of on-the-job training. More advanced training courses often are canceled or shortened because there are not enough officers to cover the inspection booths.

As a result, officers are being placed in situations without the training they need to do their jobs.

Unfortunately, but predictably, staffing shortages, forced overtime, and inadequate training contribute to serious morale problems in CBP.

Each year the Office of Personnel Management's (OPM) Federal Human Capital Survey gives federal employees the opportunity to rate their agencies on a variety of measures. In 2006 the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) ranked near the bottom of all the agencies surveyed. CBP scored even lower than DHS as a whole on most measures.

Under the circumstances, it is not surprising there is high turnover among CBP officers. At some ports of entry, CBP is losing officers faster than it can hire replacements. Attrition is a major factor in the understaffing, and CBP officer staffing is below its budgeted level. This is a vicious cycle – understaffing creates problems that lead to turnover, and high turnover makes it very difficult to address the staff shortages.

As the GAO report notes, some CBP officers are leaving to take positions that provide law enforcement officer benefits. Even though CBP officers receive mandatory law enforcement training, carry firearms, and make arrests, they do not receive the same enhanced pension benefits that other federal law enforcement officers, including Border Patrol agents, receive. Fixing this inequity would help mitigate the high turnover of CBP officers.

We owe the brave men and women charged with keeping terrorists, illegal drugs, and other dangerous people and items out of the country much better training and working conditions.

GAO also found weaknesses in the infrastructure of land border crossings that allow people to bypass inspection booths entering the country without inspection. The physical environment at some land border crossings is not conducive to thorough inspections. In many ports of entry, visitors wait hours to enter the country because there are not enough inspection booths. As a Senator from Hawaii, I fully understand the importance of facilitating efficient entry into the country for legitimate travel and trade. Tourism is almost a \$12 billion industry in Hawaii – the largest sector of our economy – and foreign visitors contribute enormously to Hawaii's and the Nation's economy.

Approximately \$4 billion in capital improvements in the facilities at land border crossings are needed, but there is only approximately \$250 million in the President's fiscal year 2008 budget for infrastructure improvements. Making improvements often is a long and difficult process because private entities, or the General Services Administration, often own the land at border crossings.

Securing our Nation's ports of entry is a critical national security priority. At the same time, we must never lose focus on the fact that these ports welcome millions of tourists, business people, students, immigrants, and refugees who make this Nation more economically and culturally vibrant. As the President's new National Strategy for Homeland Security states, achieving a "welcoming America" must remain an important goal.

It is time that we invest in the infrastructure to make our Nation's ports of entry more secure, inviting, and efficient. One approach would be to examine ways of redesigning the gateways to this country to optimize security and maximize processing rates, while improving the work environment of our Customs and Border Protection Officers.

Congress must focus more attention and resources on this issue. I will work to see that it does.

I look forward to learning more about CBP's successes and challenges, in particular CBP's staffing and infrastructure issues. I want to thank our witnesses for being here today to discuss these important issues.