

May 24, 2006

MEMORANDUM REPORT

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TO: DGHR - Ambassador John M. O'Keefe, Acting

FROM: OIG - Howard J. Krongard, Inspector General

SUBJECT: Inspection of the Office of Casualty Assistance (ISP-I-06-28)

The Office of Inspector General (OIG) inspected the Office of Casualty Assistance (OCA) between February 21 and 24, 2006. Senior Inspector Leslie Gerson conducted the inspection. The following summarizes OIG's review.

Key Judgments

- The Office of Casualty Assistance (OCA) is an excellent example of attention to contingency planning. Its director since 1999 has designed a model for the office that can address mass casualty situations while providing clients with personal caseworker support.
- The small, select OCA staff oversees several well-trained and committed crisis support teams, which serve as a no-cost mechanism for enhancing the office's capacity in times of crisis.
- OCA's centralization of support to Department of State (Department) employees has systematized assistance and improved the quality of service to the families of victims.

Admiral Crowe, chairman of the Accountability Review Board investigating the 1998 bombings of the East African embassies, recommended to Secretary of State Madeleine Albright in January 1999 that an office be established to serve as a single point of contact "for victims of terrorist acts but also for the surviving family members of employees who die natural deaths while in the service of the Department." In response, a temporary office was established quickly in the Bureau of Human Resources (DGHR). By June 1999, the director of OCA was in place and tasked with assisting all U.S. government employees under Chief of Mission authority, including Foreign Service nationals, and their family members who are victims of terrorism, mass casualty, or certain other critical incidents, whether the victims are killed, injured, or impaired.

OCA's role has since evolved. In February 2005, the office's responsibilities increased to include providing assistance to the families of all Department employees serving abroad and to the surviving family members of domestic Foreign Service and Civil Service employees who die of natural or accidental causes.

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Context

Prior to OCA's creation, the roles and responsibilities it performs were scattered throughout the Department. At a difficult time, victims and family members had to deal with red tape and varying levels of responsiveness on a wide range of vital issues, including benefits, travel and leave policies, the transportation of household effects, and other essential services of the Department and other government agencies. Presently, OCA acts as a clearinghouse for those services so that victims and family members have one initial point of contact in the critical early days following a tragedy.

OCA is involved from the moment the Department learns of an employee or family member's death or critical injury abroad or of the death of a domestic employee. OCA participates in the initial conference call to determine who will notify the next of kin, if necessary. Whichever office or individual notifies the next of kin also provides the family with OCA's contact information, and an OCA staff member follows up with a call to the family within a couple of hours, ensuring that the family quickly has a personal contact for discussing the next steps. Over the next several weeks or (in some cases) months or years after becoming involved, OCA helps families and victims apply for benefits, organizes follow-on medical attention, and helps the family cope with the myriad of paperwork as well as emotional trauma.

Executive Direction

OCA is staffed by three people, making it one of the smallest offices in the Department. Its director reports to the Foreign Service Deputy Assistant Secretary in the Office of the Director General. Despite its size, OCA has excellent access to decisionmakers.

OCA has had just one director since its creation, and the two other positions in the office have had only two incumbents. This has provided exceptional continuity and facilitated a caseworker approach to providing ongoing support to victims and families. This continuity clearly benefited the office in its fledgling years, enabling it to set up processes, establish a network of contacts, and undertake contingency planning seamlessly.

The director has an ideal combination of overseas, training, and management experience and has a clear vision for OCA and is definitely in charge. Nonetheless, the small staff works very collaboratively. The director and the program specialist divide responsibility for all death and injury cases, handling the initial contact with the family, providing and explaining forms, and managing follow up with relevant agencies until all benefits have been received. The program specialist also coordinates the crisis support team program.

The program support assistant, meanwhile, has impressively established and maintained tracking systems and databases, kept the office's publications up to date, and redesigned the OCA web site, in addition to conducting the standard administrative tasks of any office manager. In acknowledgement of her strong interpersonal skills, the director amended the program support assistant's position description to include responsibility for case management as needed.

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OCA's staff is uncommonly dedicated, and morale is high despite the stresses of dealing with personal crises. OCA's success depends primarily on the fact that its staff has strong interpersonal skills, natural empathy, and a mastery of a wide range of bureaucratic procedures. OCA's staff has just the right combination of skills. To fill future OCA vacancies, DGHR will have to be vigilant in recruitment and hiring, lest successor employees fail to have a similar mix of personal and professional skills.

Assessing whether OCA should remain a standalone office within DGHR or be incorporated into a larger office such as the Family Liaison Office or Employee Relations, OIG determined that few other offices of any size can match OCA's sense of mission, the uniformly high praise it receives from its partner offices, its emphasis on contingency planning and training, or its dedication to follow through. Furthermore, it meets these objectives all at a low cost. Incorporating OCA into a larger entity could not improve its operations but could dilute its visibility and reduce its ability to recruit senior professionals to lead it.

Crisis Support Teams

OCA was initially established to provide support to victims of mass casualties. Its three-person staff is adequate to support the families of individual employees who die or are critically injured, provided these cases arise one or two at a time. The office is also successful in providing ongoing support to mass casualty victims and their families in the months and years following a crisis. But a three-person office would be overwhelmed in the initial stages of an embassy bombing or a natural disaster.

To address these contingencies, OCA has organized six crisis support teams of at least ten persons each. Team members are drawn from volunteers within DGHR. After each summer transfer cycle, OCA conducts a two-day training program for new volunteers or to update long-term volunteers. OCA partners with the Foreign Service Institute and the Operations Center to provide task force and other training. OCA has prepared an excellent handbook for each crisis support team member to use in addressing initial benefits and compensation issues and has also provided techniques for communicating with bereaved family members. One of the crisis teams is on duty at all times, and, along with the monthly duty roster, OCA's program specialist sends out an e-mail to all team members, updating them on current issues. OCA hosts annual get-togethers over coffee or brown bag lunches so that the team members can meet each other and build a relationship with the OCA staff. In addition, DGHR has committed to making its team members available full time if they are called to duty.

The crisis support team program is a model of emergency preparedness planning. OCA does everything to keep the volunteers energized. Some team members have assisted with escort duty during memorial ceremonies; others helped on task forces in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. OIG surveyed representatives from several of the support teams and heard praise for OCA's leadership and training. One crisis support team member said, "OCA makes it easy to be a volunteer."

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Other Programs

OCA has a number of other responsibilities in addition to supporting families of victims. Each responsibility is geared to meeting the Department's priority of achieving organizational excellence. OCA staff members' duties include:

- Briefing every class of Foreign Service officers who are going to serve in Iraq and briefing management officer and human resource officer classes,
- Participating in the Avian Flu Working Group, paying particular attention to its role in the event of mass infection,
- Traveling as needed to provide support to next of kin who do not live in the Washington, DC, area and require exceptional assistance,
- Assisting victims' home bureaus with the logistics regarding the memorials and awards ceremonies that follow the death of an employee, and
- Playing an essential role in the evaluation of nominations for the Thomas Jefferson Star, which is given to victims of terrorism.

OCA's \$7,200 annual operating budget is adequate to cover these activities.

The Department of Justice Fund

Following the East African embassy bombings, the Department of Justice's Office for Victims of Crime provided the Department with \$250,000 to use for extraordinary expenses arising from the bombings. Such expenses include reimbursing embassy employees for lost wages, transportation for ongoing medical treatment and family meetings, and for counseling. The fund even purchased a cow to replace a victim's income that was lost as an indirect result of the attack. The Department of Justice renewed that account with another \$250,000 contribution as the first tranche of funding dwindled.

The fund is managed by the Bureau of Resource Management, but OCA receives bills from the victims of the embassy bombings in Nairobi and Dar es Salaam, reviews and consults on the bills, and then submits them to the Bureau of Resource Management for approval and reimbursement. Approximately \$15,000 remains in the fund, and OCA has prepared a request asking the Department of Justice to provide additional funds to cover ongoing costs for family member counseling, travel to medical appointments, and other out-of-pocket expenses.

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