

July 6, 2016

The Honorable John McCain
Chairman, Senate Committee on
Armed Services
228 Russell Senate Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20501

The Honorable Mac Thornberry
Chairman, House Committee on
Armed Services
2216 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20515

The Honorable Jack Reed
Ranking Member, Senate Committee on
Armed Services
228 Russell Senate Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20501

The Honorable Adam Smith
Ranking Member, House Committee on
Armed Services
2216 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20515

Dear Chairman McCain, Chairman Thornberry, Ranking Member Reed, and Ranking Member Smith;

Thank you for your continuing efforts to enact a National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) for Fiscal Year 2017. Your leadership continues a proud tradition of Congressional policymaking and oversight which has become a bedrock of our nation's defense policy. As supporters of our military and Department of Defense civilian employees, we respectfully request that in order to maintain their readiness, any final legislation retain Section 603 of the House FY 2017 NDAA.

As you well know, if the federal government is going to succeed at maintaining an all-volunteer military and retaining a skilled civilian workforce, it must demonstrate its commitment to their success and to treat them with fairness. We are therefore concerned about recent actions taken by the Department of Defense that would reduce the per diem rates for federal employees and members of the military who travel for longer than 30 days for work.

The Department's new policy would create a three-tiered rate structure to compensate the workforce for official travel: the standard rate for travel for fewer than 30 days, a new rate for employees and members of the military who travel between 30 and 180 days, and another new rate for employees and members of the military who travel for more than 180 days. The new rates would be 25% and 45% lower, respectively, than the per diem for travel for fewer than 30 days.

We are concerned that this policy is not an appropriate way to accomplish Congress' desired end of reducing the cost of official travel. This proposal would effectively impose a new burden on individuals to identify housing below market rates and planning meals on an inadequate budget. Instead, the Department should accomplish the goal of reducing costs not by passing it off onto individuals, but instead using its market power to negotiate better rates for longer-term housing.

The House Armed Services Committee acknowledged this discrepancy and adopted language that prohibits the Department from further instituting this harmful policy and provides space for an alternative to be developed. While we appreciate the Senate's adoption of separate language, Section 1151 of the Senate FY 2017 NDAA, which gives DoD leadership the option to waive the reduced per diem rate for travel longer than 30 days when the reduced rate is determined insufficient for meals and incidental expenses. Under the Senate's provision, DoD military and civilian employees can still be required to personally pay for official expenses while traveling for work.

There are many viable alternatives that the Department can use to reduce travel costs. The private sector has developed and instituted a number of options that could reduce costs and uphold the federal government's commitment to federal employees and members of the military. We remain concerned that the Department seems to be unwilling to work with industry and labor to evaluate these options. We are confident that an alternative method could meet the Department's efforts to save costs, while adopting proven industry best practices.

Now is not the time to erode the morale of our military and civilian workforce following the longest period of armed conflict, a government shutdown, and civilian furloughs. Anecdotal evidence has already begun to emerge from both members of the military and civilian employees that this policy has had real consequences on the federal workforce and our military readiness. Your support for retaining the language within Section 603 of the House FY 2017 NDAA would make real progress in addressing the growing cost of travel, while maintaining fairness to our military and civilian workforce and private sector partners.

Sincerely,

Derek Kilmer
Member of Congress

Mark Takai
Member of Congress