COMMITTEE ON
SCIENCE, SPACE, & TECHNOLOGY
Lamar Smith, Chairman

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Statement of Chairman Lamar Smith (R-Texas)

Human Spaceflight Ethics and Obligations: Options for Monitoring, Diagnosing, and Treating Former Astronauts

Chairman Smith: Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and welcome to our witnesses. Captain Cassidy, Captain Kelly, and Captain Lopez-Alegria.

Since the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) selected the first group of astronauts in 1959, more than three hundred of America's finest have ventured into the cosmos as explorers. Each one of these astronauts represented the compelling urge of humankind to explore and to discover. And the lure of curiosity that leads one to try to go where no one has gone before.

From Neil Armstrong's first step on the Moon to Captain Kelly's one-year voyage on the International Space Station, their peaceful exploration of outer space continues to inspire our nation and the world.

In an age when space flight has come to seem almost routine, it is easy to overlook how dangerous it is and how little we know about the long-term health effects of spaceflight.

For almost twenty years, astronauts have lived on the International Space Station. One of their primary missions has been to learn about the physiological and psychological effects of long-duration human space flight. Captain Kelly's one-year mission was in pursuit of a scientific understanding of how the human body responds to extended space flight.

But even with our twenty years of experience on the ISS, we are only just beginning to understand the effects of long-duration missions.

Our lack of knowledge becomes especially evident as NASA prepares for its journey to Mars. Only twenty-four individuals have journeyed beyond low-earth orbit. All of these astronauts flew during the Apollo era and never for more than a handful of days.

Using our current propulsion technology, a successful mission to Mars will require astronauts to survive a roundtrip spaceflight of no less than several hundred days. And unlike our near-Earth environment, the trip to Mars will offer no natural protection from galactic cosmic rays and solar radiation.

Today, through its Lifetime Surveillance of Astronaut Health program, NASA screens and monitors astronauts for occupational related injury or disease. This program contributes to our scientific knowledge of long-term health effects and assists participating astronauts in monitoring for spaceflight related illnesses and disease.

But this program does not provide for diagnosis or treatment of those no longer serving, nor for "management" and retired astronauts because NASA is not explicitly authorized to provide such services. These astronauts can receive treatment from the Department of Labor or the Veterans Administration now, but this may not be the best process for the former astronauts or NASA's developing knowledge base.

We, as a nation, have a responsibility to ensure that our astronauts, both active and retired, are provided with appropriate monitoring, diagnosis, and treatment of spaceflight related injuries and disease. This is also the recommendation of the National Academy of Sciences in its 2004 review of NASA's longitudinal study of astronaut health.

For our nation, the question should not be whether we should provide these services to our astronauts, but rather how to do it in a way that best addresses the current and future needs of our space explorers in America's quest for discovery of new frontiers. Thank you Mr. Chairman, I yield back.

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