

Senate Democratic Policy Committee Hearing
**“Contractor Misconduct and the Electrocution Deaths
of American Soldiers in Iraq”**

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My name is Debbie Crawford. I'm a journeyman electrician and have been in the trade nearly 30 years. I hold a journeyman license in both Oregon and Washington.

I worked for KBR/SEII in the Green Zone in Iraq from July 2004 to July 2006. During my first year, I worked as an electrician performing electrical work and supervising local Iraqi electricians. During my second year, I worked as an Administrative Specialist in the same organization where one of my primary responsibilities was coordinating the department's safety program.

The lack of proper tools and material was a consistent problem. The most basic tools and equipment were not always available or were of poor quality. Some craftspeople brought their own personal tools from the States. Even the most basic material such as electrical tape and wire nuts were at times scarce. This lack of tools and material forced work to be done in a less than professional manner. It also encouraged hoarding by employees, which only compounded the problem.

Most work done in the Green Zone was awarded to sub-contractors. The sub-contractors employed third country national and local national workers who were not familiar or skilled in U.S. quality standards, U.S. safety standards and installation techniques, or U.S. codes. It was not uncommon for KBR electricians to go in after a subcontractor had supposedly completed a job, to actually complete it or repair their work. The construction of small, temporary “man camps” was a particular problem and I personally received several complaints from Blackwater employees that they were being shocked in their trailers.

The KBR employees supervising these electrical contractors often had no electrical experience at all. It was not uncommon for a labor foreman with no electrical experience to supervise Iraqi electrical subcontractors or third country nationals doing electrical work.

While working in Iraq, I saw green wire, which was specifically designated by the National Electric Code (NEC) as ground wire, used as a “hot” wire. I brought this to my foreman's attention but my complaints were totally disregarded. When I pressed him I was told that was all they had, make it work, and don't worry about it. This was just one of countless examples of poor leadership and poor workmanship by KBR in Iraq.

There are many qualified and competent KBR electricians. But not all KBR electricians were qualified to do this kind of work. When I applied in 2004 the job posting stated a license was required. No one in Houston asked to see my license or checked my job references, and no qualification test was given. The current KBR job posting has no licensing requirements and states, "Typically requires 2-5 years of related experience." In the United States, five years of experience barely gets you through an apprenticeship program.

We had one new hire show up in Iraq as a journeyman electrician to do construction and maintenance work. He installed telephone lines in the United States. He was concerned about his safety because he clearly was working outside his area of expertise. He told me his qualifications were clearly stated on his resume. I contacted our foreman and he was transferred to the communications department. It is safe to assume he was not the first or the last electrician hired and expected to perform work outside their area of expertise.

Supervision by KBR was also sorely lacking. My electrical general foreman at the Palace was not even an electrician. And yet he would argue with qualified electricians about quality, code and safety issues. He insisted I work on energized circuits in order to not inconvenience the client, but then questioned my qualifications if I got shocked. It got to the point that I would not inform him of everything I was doing, in order to ensure I could do it correctly and safely. How can you effectively supervise electricians when you don't understand what they are doing or what the potential ramifications are if it is not done correctly?

Qualified electricians found it difficult to deal with the complacency, the lack of leadership, the lack of tools and materials, and the lack of safety. Many didn't make it a month before they quit and went home. Many of those who were committed to completing their contracts found themselves in constant conflict with supervisors, engineers and the safety department – some just gave up and complied with their instructions.

Time and time again we heard, "This is not the States, OSHA doesn't apply here," "You're in a war zone, what do you expect," and "If you don't like it you can go home." The threats to send employees home were so prevalent that KBR corporate had to remind its supervisors and managers that it was against company policy to threaten employees.

During the two years I was in Iraq working for KBR – from July 2004 to July 2006 – I had not heard of any deaths due to accidental electrocution. To the best of my knowledge, there were no official KBR statements asking electricians and other personnel to take extra precautions. The electricians were not asked to heighten their level of awareness to potential shock hazards. There was no supplemental training given on effective grounding and bonding.

KBR has claimed that its contract did not cover fixing potential hazards – only repairing items after they broke down. It is my professional opinion that reported

electrical shocks are not a potential hazard. It is an imminent hazard that needs immediate attention to prevent serious injury and death.

KBR claims to have “an unwavering commitment to safety” but chose not to make these necessary repairs because the company claimed it was “not part of the contract.” As part of this commitment to safety, did KBR prohibit its own employees from entering the buildings where electrical shocks were taking place? I suspect not. The deaths we are discussing could just as easily have been a KBR employee, most likely an unsuspecting plumber.

It saddens and angers me that at least 11 American soldiers and two civilian contractors have died due to electrocution. Not in combat, but at camps and bases where they should have felt the safest. As licensed electricians, we are bound to protect human life first and foremost. We did not do that and I feel we have failed them.