December 3, 2013

The Honorable Duncan Hunter
223 Cannon House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Representative Hunter:

I write on behalf of the American Anthropological Association (AAA) to express my strong support for your efforts to end the Army’s practice of embedding social scientists with combat units in the program known as the Human Terrain System (HTS).

We are especially encouraged to see it more widely acknowledged by Members of Congress that the HTS Program’s shortcomings are not simply ones of poor execution, but of misguided mission, inappropriate staffing, and lack of recognized need. It is impossible to do high-quality, professionally responsible social science research at gunpoint, and reports submitted to the Army’s Training and Doctrine Command (TRADOC) suggest that the program does not make a significant contribution to the counterinsurgency effort.

As the AAA has pointed out for several years, military leaders ought to have been the first to acknowledge that you cannot expect people to tell complete strangers anything resembling the “truth” in times of conflict. And social scientists have a professional responsibility to point this out. Social scientists also have the professional responsibility to do no harm to the persons and communities involved in their studies, and to give informed consent, without coercion, to those who participate in their studies. The circumstances under which the HTS Program operates compromise the quality and integrity of the research it purports to carry out, and work at cross-purposes with the overall mission to reduce armed conflict.

The AAA, with more than 12,000 members, is dedicated to advancing knowledge of the human condition, and to applying this knowledge to tackling the world’s most pressing problems. We feel a responsibility to help improve US government policies through fact-finding, dialogue, and deliberation. More important than the legion of problems HTS has encountered in its planning and execution, it is fundamentally flawed. It is well past time that the HTS program be de-authorized, and we applaud your efforts to end this unproductive, irresponsible activity.

Sincerely,

Monica Heller
President, American Anthropological Association