

C.I.A. Begins Compensating Victims of Havana Syndrome

Officers and diplomats have reported ailments arising from mysterious incidents since 2016. But lawyers for some say future cases may be harder to adjudicate.



The American Embassy in Havana. U.S. personnel injured in mysterious health incidents in Havana and other places can receive up to \$187,300 in compensation. Meridith Kohut for The New York Times



By **Julian E. Barnes**

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WASHINGTON — The C.I.A. has begun to make compensation payments to current and former officers who sustained traumatic brain injuries from a series of mysterious health incidents, according to officials and others briefed on the arrangements.

About a dozen people suffering from debilitating symptoms that have become known as Havana syndrome have either received the payments or been approved to receive them, the people familiar with the program said.

Several of the recipients are former C.I.A. officers who were injured while serving in Havana in 2016 and 2017. However, payments are also being processed for current and former officers whose injuries occurred elsewhere.

Diplomats and C.I.A. officers began reporting ailments arising from strange incidents beginning in 2016 in Havana. Since then, government employees and family members in China, Austria, Serbia and other locations around the world have also reported symptoms.

One victim who has received payments praised the C.I.A. for making the application process easy, but lawyers for other officers have expressed worry that later cases may be harder to adjudicate. Unlike those hurt while serving at the C.I.A. station in Havana, some injured officers have a shorter and potentially less well-documented treatment history, which may make applying for payments more difficult.

The officials briefed on the payment program said the C.I.A. was trying to be compassionate, not miserly, in making its decisions, something lawmakers who devised the program said they wanted.

Several current and former officials who discussed the program did so on the condition their names not be used because elements of the program, and injured officers who work for the agency, remain secret.

The [Havana Act](#), which Congress approved last year, provides up to \$187,300 in compensation to each victim. Tammy Kupperman Thorp, the C.I.A. director of public affairs, said the act gave the agency authority to provide payments to employees, family members and other individuals affiliated with the C.I.A. who have “a qualifying injury to the brain.”

“The guidelines put in place were developed in partnership with the interagency and permit payments regardless of where the incident

occurred,” Ms. Thorp said. “As we have previously said, these authorities are an important part of the agency’s commitment to support its work force.”

Senator Susan Collins, Republican of Maine, said it was welcome news that government employees affected by anomalous health incidents, or A.H.I.s, were “finally receiving the health care and financial assistance they need” through the Havana Act.

“Having met with several individuals affected by A.H.I.s who are experiencing debilitating symptoms from neurological and cognitive damage, I know how much this assistance is needed,” said Ms. Collins, who drafted the original legislation.

The State Department has yet to make any payments. But a spokesman for the department said officials were carefully considering the parameters for the program and would begin processing payments soon.

The act gives government agencies some latitude in deciding who should receive the payments and does not limit eligibility by location. Victims can qualify for the compensation in a variety of ways, and it is not only those injured in anomalous health incidents who may be awarded the compensation.

Under rules established by the State Department and the C.I.A., victims must show they had a brain injury in connection with “war, insurgency, hostile act, terrorist activity or other incidents” designated by the secretary of state or the C.I.A. director. Victims must also have received active treatment for their injuries for at least 12 months.

Many victims were upset by [interim C.I.A. findings](#) announced this year that said the illnesses were unlikely to have been caused by a hostile foreign country targeting agency officers in a global campaign. Many of the 1,000 cases examined by the agency were explained by previously undiagnosed health issues or environmental factors, officials said. Some were possibly psychosomatic or so-called functional illness. But the agency said that roughly two dozen cases remained unexplained and required further evidence.

Another [report by a panel of experts](#) convened by the Biden administration found that pulsed radio energy could have caused head injuries and other symptoms reported by diplomats and C.I.A. officers. The report also said

that stress reactions could have contributed to continuing symptoms but rejected the idea that mass hysteria, psychosomatic responses or other functional illness could explain the initial injuries.

Mark S. Zaid, a national security lawyer who represents nearly two dozen people who have suffered from the anomalous health incidents, said it had been difficult for some victims to apply for the compensation. Others have struggled to be formally diagnosed by government doctors as required for approval for benefits or medical treatment.

While it is relatively easy to get treatment soon after an incident, setting up extended care has been more difficult, Mr. Zaid said.

Government officials have also viewed reports of anomalous domestic incidents skeptically, he said.

“They do not want to acknowledge domestic incidents,” Mr. Zaid said.

But other victims said the C.I.A. had reached out to help them apply for the Havana Act compensation. Current and former agency officers who are already part of the government’s expanded care program, which helps pay for medical expenses, have already provided much of the documentation needed to get approved for the compensation.

One victim injured in Havana who received the maximum payment said that while the money was not life changing, it had been helpful and, more important, was an official acknowledgment that an incident had occurred and caused permanent brain injuries.

Investigating Havana Syndrome

[Panel Says Some Havana Syndrome Cases May Stem From Radio Energy
Feb. 2, 2022](#)

[Most ‘Havana Syndrome’ Cases Unlikely Caused by Foreign Power, C.I.A.
Says
Jan. 20, 2022](#)

[Review Finds No Answers to Mystery of Havana Syndrome
Dec. 2, 2021](#)

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