



COMMITTEE ON HOMELAND SECURITY

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Hearing Statement of Chairman Bennie G. Thompson (D-MS)

Defending the Homeland from Bioterrorism: Are We Prepared?

October 17, 2019

I would like to thank the Emergency Preparedness, Response, and Recovery Subcommittee for holding today's hearing. I want to also thank the witnesses for joining us to lend their expertise to this important discussion. Through the years, the Department of Homeland Security has consistently struggled with its biodetection capabilities. BioWatch, the Department's biological weapon detection system, was developed in the wake of the anthrax attack on two U.S. Senators that followed the 9/11 attacks.

Nefarious actors developing and using biological weapons on American citizens is a huge threat. That is why this Committee has led significant oversight efforts of the Department's challenges with developing adequate biodetection capabilities, and I am pleased that this topic continues to be a priority for this subcommittee. Through our oversight, we have learned that BioWatch has not performed as it should. Specifically, the operation process of BioWatch is expensive, detection time is too long, and the system has difficulty distinguishing between normally occurring biological agents and those used by terrorists.

The criticism of BioWatch prompted the Department to develop Biodetection 21 (BD21), the biodetection apparatus that is intended to replace BioWatch. BD21 is expected to be deployed within the next few years, though it is still unclear as to whether it will address the biodetection capability gaps of its predecessor. We have also heard concerning reports that highlight the shortcomings of BD21's technology, like triggers may be less accurate, and handheld equipment used to investigate warnings prompted by the triggers are not mature enough to be operational. Further, the Department's Office of Countering Weapons of Mass Destruction (CWMD) has received criticism for its limited stakeholder outreach. Considering that state and local public health officials will be the first to respond in the event of a biological attack, it is troubling that they do not believe the CWMD Office has shared enough information on the BD21 technology before being asked to adopt the new system.

Stakeholders have also indicated that because BD21 trigger prototypes are likely to have a much higher false positive rate than BioWatch, it is probable that the expense of the program will increase. Since 2013, the Department has attempted to reorganize its chemical, biological, radiological, and nuclear mission spaces, the latest of which established the CWMD Office in 2017. This Office was intended to elevate the Department's efforts to counter weapons of mass destruction, but since its establishment there have been serious operational concerns like low morale and the lack of meaningful stakeholder engagement.

These concerns were also highlighted in a 2016 Government Accountability Office report (GAO-16-603). I am interested to hear from the witnesses about the extent to which the Department engages with them on biodetection-related concerns associated with the CWMD reorganization. I also look forward to hearing from the witnesses on whether the CWMD reorganization has affected the Department's ability to carry out its biodetection mission. I am interested to hear from our witnesses about how this change will impact state and local biological preparedness.

#

Media contact: Adam Comis at (202) 225-9978