



COMMITTEE ON HOMELAND SECURITY

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Hearing Statement of Emergency Preparedness, Response, and Recovery Subcommittee Chairman Donald M. Payne, Jr. (D-NJ)

Defending the Homeland from Bioterrorism: Are We Prepared?

October 17, 2019

I want to thank you all for coming to today's hearing about the state of bioterrorism preparedness in the United States. I also want to thank the witnesses for testifying on this important topic. Bioterrorism represents a real and persistent threat to this nation. Biological weapons are relatively inexpensive, simple to deliver, and can cause mass casualties. Gram for gram, they are amongst the deadliest weapons created by humans. Even with a small quantity of biological weapons, a terrorist can cause massive harm to our society.

The Department of Homeland Security's Countering Weapons of Mass Destruction Office has an important role in strengthening the nation's ability to prevent terrorists from using such weapons of mass destruction. Formed nearly two years ago, the Countering Weapons of Mass Destruction Office (CWMD) is the focal point for the Department's efforts to counter WMD threats. CWMD was created to centralize and streamline DHS' countering weapons of mass destruction programs into a single office that could enhance our defenses, share best practices, leverage shared resources, and unify command. However, there have been several recent reports that raise concerns about CWMD. Even before these reports, our Committee had concerns about the creation of the office. We were concerned that the reorganization would hurt employee morale, shortchange the biological defense programs, and impact DHS' ability to carry out its important countering WMD terrorism mission.

Recently, issues were raised about the technology behind CWMD's new bio-detection system as well as with cuts being made to several WMD counterterrorism programs. In 2018 the Federal Employment Morale Viewpoint Survey ranked CWMD as the lowest scoring office in the Federal government. Previously, the office had been ranked in the top 20% of the federal government in terms of morale. Such a precipitous decline in morale over the course of two years is an extremely concerning trend. Furthermore, the Assistant Secretary of CWMD--Jim McDonnell--recently resigned, leaving CWMD without a permanent leader during this precarious time.

I should also add that just days ago Acting Secretary Kevin McAleenan announced that he was resigning. DHS is suffering a serious leadership drought that undoubtedly complicates the Department's ability to execute its mission. That said, providing oversight to DHS is an important and timely function of this Committee. We must ensure that DHS is adequately executing its mission to protect Americans from weapons of mass destruction. Today, we will hear from witnesses who are on the frontline of keeping this nation safe from bioterrorists. We will hear their perspectives on the threat posed by bioterrorists, the state of national bioterrorism preparedness, and what DHS can do to better protect this nation from bioterrorists. This is an important topic and we need to make sure that we are doing all we can to protect our nation from the threat of bioterrorism.

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