



COMMITTEE ON HOMELAND SECURITY

Ranking Member Bennie G. Thompson

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Subcommittee Hearing Statement of Ranking Member Bennie G. Thompson (D-MS)

Securing our Nation from WMDs: A Review of the Department of Homeland Security's Countering Weapons of Mass Destruction Office

March 20, 2024

The Department of Homeland Security's Countering Weapons of Mass Destruction Office (CWMD) and Office of Health Security (OHS) play vital roles in preparing the Nation against threats, whether natural or manmade. That is why I continue to be concerned about CWMD's authorization, which is currently scheduled to sunset on Friday.

This Committee has worked on a bipartisan extension for CWMD, but it is not yet law. Congress needs to pass a long-term reauthorization for the office. I look forward to arriving at a solution so CWMD can continue to fulfill its important role in homeland security.

Under past leadership, there have been questions and criticisms about CWMD's technologies and workforce morale. In 2019, I worked on a bicameral, bipartisan effort with the Senate to encourage more transparency at CWMD and obtain information about the programs that were the subject of criticism. One such program was Biowatch, CWMD's premier biodetection program. This program is now over 20 years old and has not had significant updates during its life. CWMD initiated BD-21, an acquisition program to replace the aging BioWatch technology, but the anticipated upgrades have not come to fruition.

Last year, the Department announced the Environmental BioDetection Capability Development and Maturation Project, which appears to be the next step in biodetection. I look forward to learning more about this project today. CWMD's workforce morale issues have repeatedly been identified as a concern, as I mentioned. Since its establishment, CWMD has been either ranked the lowest or close to the lowest in the annual Best Places to Work in the Federal Government survey. I look forward to hearing how Assistant Secretary Callahan has been working to improve employee morale and what plans there are for the future. The morale and mental health of the DHS workforce has long been a priority of mine.

This Congress, I introduced H.R. 2577, the *Suicide Prevention and Resiliency for Law Enforcement Act*, which directs DHS to address the mental health and wellness of its agents and officers in a comprehensive manner to improve care and reduce the stigma associated with seeking help. H.R. 2577 would establish the Law Enforcement Mental Health and Wellness Program to be overseen by the Department's Chief Medical Officer, who we have before us today.

Established in 2022, the Office of Health Security is tasked with ensuring DHS workforce resiliency and emergency response planning, policy, and oversight in collaboration with other agencies. In recent years, OHS has also overseen the medical and public health programs for tens of thousands of people resettling in the U.S. – these programs include Operations Allies Welcome and Uniting for Ukraine.

I look forward to hearing today how OHS, while still very new, is pursuing its mission and working with other components at DHS.

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