



COMMITTEE ON HOMELAND SECURITY

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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

Examining the U.S. Department of Homeland Security Countering Weapons of Mass Destruction Office

July 16, 2021

In 2018, the Office was created with the dual mission of preventing a Weapons of Mass Destruction attack against the U.S. and leading DHS' efforts to safeguard the United States against chemical, biological, radiological, nuclear and health security threats. By 2019, it was apparent that CWMD was in trouble. That is when we learned of the Trump Administration dismantling several of the Office's programs.

In August 2019, I, along with then-Ranking Member Mike Rogers and our Senate counterparts, wrote to DHS to express our concerns about the changes underway at CWMD. The then-Assistant Secretary, James McDonnell, responded by assuring us that the CWMD programs were "realigned or restructured to better address threats, remove bureaucratic redundancy, and fully align with the President's National Security Strategy and our appropriation." Shortly thereafter, there were a series of abrupt changes in leadership during the last year of the Trump Administration. Mr. Rasicot, I look forward to hearing why you came back to lead CWMD and what you plan to do to get CWMD on a positive trajectory.

One area of major concern is CWMD's low workforce morale. In 2019, morale within this Office was ranked the lowest among all subagencies in the Federal government, according to the Office of Personnel Management. It has been reported that CWMD's biological threat detection system, BioWatch, which is deployed in 30 major metropolitan areas, is unable to fulfill its primary task of detecting aerosolized biological attacks. Confidence in the direction CWMD took the program hit a new low when, in 2021, the Bipartisan Commission on Biodefense recommended to eliminate the program from all future Presidential Budget Requests until replacement technology is identified and confirmed to meet the needs of the program.

Additionally, CWMD's nuclear and radiological defense efforts have significant challenges. According to the Comptroller General, CWMD's "Securing the Cities" program, which is operated by local authorities in metropolitan areas to prevent terrorist attacks and other high-consequence events, does not collect information to fully track program spending or performance and has "not addressed challenges to sustaining the programs."

At this time, it is critical that we hear from current CWMD leadership about its plan to address the challenges identified by GAO and others. Given all the challenges inherited from the Trump Administration, the challenge before the Biden Administration, at this time, is where to focus its energies to position CWMD for success. I welcome the testimony from our witnesses today and hope to learn about the solutions to these many challenges.

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