



COMMITTEE ON HOMELAND SECURITY

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Hearing Statement of Emergency Preparedness, Response, & Recovery Subcommittee Chairwoman Val Demings (D-FL)

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

July 16, 2021

We are here today to discuss the state of the U.S. Department of Homeland Security Countering Weapons of Mass Destruction Office (CWMD). This September marks the 20th anniversary of the worst terrorist attack on U.S. soil.

Since that time there has been general agreement that we, as a nation, must be prepared to address terrorism and attacks on our country—regardless of the mode of attack. That means being prepared for low-probability, high-consequence attacks involving chemical, biological, radiological, or nuclear materials. As we emerge from an extremely tragic year, where COVID-19 took the lives of over 600,000 Americans, it does not take a lot of imagination to envision the damage that a Chemical, Biological, Radiological, Nuclear (CBRN) attack could do to our country. In addition to the immediate health and safety consequences, such an attack could imperil our nation’s critical infrastructure and destabilize large swaths of the country.

For its part, within DHS, it falls to the CWMD Office to not only prevent such attacks but also partner with domestic and international partners to safeguard the U.S. against health security threats. Unfortunately, since CWMD was authorized in 2018, it has faced significant challenges and persistent problems, some of which predate the Office’s establishment, that have undermined the Office’s ability to successfully fulfill its vital mission.

CWMD’s challenges were not unforeseen. In August 2016, the Comptroller General cautioned -- two years prior to the Trump Administration’s unilateral action to consolidate existing programs into a new CWMD office -- that DHS “did not fully assess and document potential problems that could result from consolidation.” Although the CWMD workforce has performed laudable activities during the pandemic—taking such actions as issuing guidance, performing biosurveillance, and leading efforts to vaccinate the DHS workforce—numerous governmental and nongovernmental reports indicate that there are significant structural and workforce morale issues within CWMD.

CWMD is at a crossroads. At this time, there are a number of proposals to spin off major portions of the Office and there is a fair bit of skepticism that the organization will have adequate resources to deliver on the promise of its most prominent and consequential detection programs. For instance, DHS continues to struggle to deliver a biodetection capability that can be effectively deployed in urban and other high-risk areas. In 2003, DHS began installing BioWatch air samplers inconspicuously at street level and atop buildings in cities across the country to detect deadly biological attacks. But that program never quite delivered the situational awareness that local responders needed so, DHS, shifted gears to the “Biodetection for the 21st Century” or “BD21” program. Unfortunately, that program is struggling too. In fact, a May 2021 report issued by the Comptroller General found that the program faces

“technical challenges due to inherent limitations in the technologies and uncertainties with combining technologies for use in biodetection.”

Then there is the Securing the Cities program, which is supposed to detect nuclear and radiological threats in urban areas. In recent years, the Trump Administration sowed “confusion and uncertainty” among city officials participating in the program, according to the Comptroller General, when the then-leader of CWMD communicated to stakeholders that DHS wanted to reduce its participation and let other federal agencies play a larger role.

Around the same time, in 2019, there was reporting that the Trump Administration had quietly dismantled or cut back programs such as --CWMD’s “Red Team” program that carried out dozens of drills and assessments around the country each year to help Federal, state and local officials detect potential threats such as an improvised nuclear device concealed in a suitcase, or a cargo ship carrying a radiation-spewing “dirty bomb” as well as the Operations Support Directorate, which had helped lead up to 20 WMD-related training exercises each year with state and local authorities.

Some of the challenges CWMD faces today are a byproduct of the way in which CWMD was formed by the Trump Administration; other challenges are intrinsic to its mission. Given all of its challenges, DHS leadership will have to prioritize improvements to CWMD in order to enhance the Department’s counter-CBRN programs. This Subcommittee stands ready to assist CWMD and the Department in their efforts to improve our nation’s ability to protect the homeland against weapons of mass destruction.

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