

CONGRESSMAN HANSEN CLARKE (D-MI) - OPENING STATEMENT

“The State of Northern Border Preparedness: A Review of Federal, State, and Local Coordination”

Committee on Homeland Security

October 28, 2011 at 10:00 AM

Marvin I. Danto Engineering Development Center Auditorium (Wayne State University)

Good morning. Thank you Chairman Bilirakis for convening this important hearing regarding our preparedness for the unique security challenges on the Northern Border.

It has been a pleasure to working with you in a truly bipartisan way on several key initiatives and conducting oversight on efforts that are critically important to the safety and security of our Nation.

I also want to take time to recognize Wayne State University for hosting this hearing and the table-top exercise held earlier this morning.

President Allan D. Gilmour is an exceptional leader and has taken the University to greater heights. The diverse student body is actively engaged in cutting edge research that will help our Nation to out innovate the rest of the world.

President Gilmour’s staff has done a great job working with my staff and the Committee’s staff to coordinate this informative hearing. I would specifically like to recognize Alyson Wrase, from the Vice President’s office, James Williams, Director of Federal Affairs, Jasmine Robertson, Program Coordinator for College of Engineering, and Police Chief Anthony Holt for their hard work and professionalism.

I would also like to recognize members of the Wayne State’s Crisis Management Team who took time to develop and participate in this morning’s table top exercise.

Being here at Wayne State University is very timely given the numerous assets here that would be useful in times of crisis, and the excellent work they are doing to prepare future first responders and emergency managers for the threats and issues that could arise in an emergency.

In addition, Wayne State and all of midtown have infrastructure that would be critical in an emergency, including these engineering facilities and the nearby medical center.

A special thanks to all the witnesses for participating in today’s hearing to discuss the important issue of cross-governmental coordination to prepare for all-hazards. I’m especially looking forward to hearing about the efforts and needs of the State and local officials, who are on the frontlines when disaster strikes.

It is vitally important that we provide them with the tools and support they need, so their testimony today will be very valuable in understanding how we build and sustain much needed capabilities. Thank you to all of those first responders here today for your service in protecting our communities.

Each community faces its own unique challenges and the local responders there are best prepared to address and handle a disaster response.

I am glad that we are able to hold this hearing in my hometown of Detroit, building on the record of the previous field hearing in Tampa. Detroit is my home, and it has special characteristics that make it different than Tampa, or the Southern border in Texas, or the east coast, west coast, or center of the nation. These special characteristics must be considered as we develop preparedness plans.

Detroit has one of our nation's busiest border crossings. We have our own waterway (the Great Lakes), our own extreme weather conditions (floods and sub-zero temperatures), and our own unique infrastructure needs.

These characteristics require a constant readiness for man-made and natural disasters.

Unfortunately, over the last several years we have seen an increase in more intense and devastating natural disasters, both internationally and here at home.

This year alone we have seen massive wildfires in Texas, tornadoes transform communities in Missouri and Alabama, as well an earthquake and Hurricane on the east coast.

Here in Detroit, it has been several years since we have had the need for a FEMA response, but we can still remember the devastating snowstorm of 1999, which required FEMA's response, and the FEMA response center set up at the Detroit airport in 2004 to administer assistance after late spring severe storms, tornadoes, and flooding.

We should also be very mindful of the fact that homegrown and foreign terrorist are still committed to attacking the homeland in small and large cities across the country.

According to Secretary Napolitano, the terrorist threat is at its highest level since 9/11.

We must reaffirm our commitment to preparedness despite the absence of a successful attack on the homeland. Efforts must continue to be taken to protect our cities, ports, and various modes of transportation that are the targets of those who seek do us harm.

Building our efforts to detect, prevent, and respond to the threat of the use of a Weapon of Mass Destruction is of particular concern.

As an original co-sponsor of the Weapons of Mass Destruction Prevention and Preparedness Act, I am proud to support this bipartisan legislation that addresses vital WMD issues from prevention to recovery.

The WMD Act ensures first responders are supported through training, exercise participation, intelligence information, grant funding, and inclusion in the preparedness planning process.

Early this morning Chief Holt led a tabletop exercise that built on others held in the Detroit area, to identify response protocols, promote information sharing and collaboration in response to a potential WMD attack.

I will continue to push my colleagues in Congress to move forward with providing the policies and resources to assist those on the frontlines.

As I have said on numerous occasions, given the numerous threats we face, this is not the time to cut back on homeland security. The resources provided to state and local first responders are essential and ensure they have the equipment, staffing levels, and training needed to effectively respond.

FEMA, CBP, and the Coast Guard need resources to perform their important mission and to be able to successfully assist State and local agencies if called upon.

Unfortunately, the ongoing debate on how to respond to our fiscal challenges has caused some of my colleagues in Congress to question the usefulness of fully funding DHS and providing grant funds to first responder agencies.

As the debate about the Nation's fiscal future continues we must realize that we should not shortchange the Nation's preparedness. Every dollar spent on preparedness and mitigation pays off in the lives saved when – not if – disaster strikes, or when a terrorist attack is successfully deterred.

Grant programs such as the Urban Area Security Initiative which provides Detroit and other cities with funds to safeguard against terrorist attack and plan for a host of catastrophic incidents were drastically cut.

Specifically, the Urban Area Security Initiative (UASI) Grant Program provides funding to address the unique planning, organization, equipment, training, and exercise needs of high-threat, high density urban areas, and assists them in building an enhanced and sustainable capacity to prevent, protect against, respond to, and recover from acts of terrorism.

Unfortunately, the Fiscal Year 2012 Homeland Security Budget passed earlier this year by House of Representatives makes dramatic and devastating cuts to preparedness grants, including Urban Area Security Initiative, State Homeland Security, and several other major grant programs.

Despite the ultimate passage of the bill, I was able to lead a group of legislators to amend the flawed bill to ensure that Detroit and other mid-sized cities weren't arbitrarily removed from the list of cities eligible for UASI funding in the future. I also am continuing to work to make sure that the unique risks and vulnerabilities of our region are acknowledged, so that Detroit can be a Tier I city and receive the funding it needs to keep its citizens secure.

I hope that our discussion today helps to highlight the needs that exist and provides additional information to help Congress reverse course and provide the funding needed for cities like Detroit across the country.

We can not afford to lose ground and hinder our ability to build and sustain capabilities needed for man-made and natural disasters.

I look forward to hearing from the panel about what specific affects Federal cuts to funding will have on State and local response capabilities.

Additionally, I would like hear how FEMA's Regional Office has progressed since the enactment of the Post-Katrina Emergency Management Reform Act and utilize new authorities granted by Administrator Fugate. It would also be helpful to hear how the Customs and Border Patrol and Coast Guard coordinate with State and local officials, as well as our Canadian security partners.

This hearing will help us understand the progress that has been made and what gaps need to be filled in disaster preparedness and response on the Northern Border.