

Ranking Member Brian Higgins - Opening Statement

Subcommittee on Counterterrorism and Intelligence

“Counterterrorism Efforts to Combat a Chemical, Biological, Radiological, and Nuclear Attack on the Homeland”

April 25, 2013

I would like to thank the Chairman for holding the first Subcommittee hearing this Congress. I look forward to working with him in a bipartisan manner. Let me also publically thank the FBI, Joint Terrorism Task Force, Department of Homeland Security and state and local officials for their efforts in apprehending a suspect in the Boston Marathon Bombing. Their efforts exemplified the type of collaboration that we envision when state, local, and federal agencies work together.

On Monday, the Royal Canadian Mounted Police announced that they, along with the FBI and DHS, disrupted a terrorist plot to attack a commuter train that runs from Toronto through the Northern Border at Niagara Falls into New York City. The individuals charged allegedly received support from Al Qaeda in Iran. I commend the work of Canadian and United States intelligence and law enforcement agencies for successful efforts to thwart an attack on our nations.

I believe it is the duty of this Subcommittee to examine threats from Al Qaeda in Iran, and I hope the Chairman will hold a hearing on Al Qaeda in Iran and any threats it poses to the United States. According to Secretary of State Kerry, Iran is moving closer and closer to possessing a nuclear weapon. Nuclear proliferation in Iran, Syria, and North Korea should encourage us that we need to be prepared for an attack here in the United States.

We have been fortunate that a chemical, biological, radiological, or nuclear attack has never come to fruition in the United States. In 2008, the Commission on the Prevention of WMD Proliferation and Terrorism produced a report entitled World at Risk. According to that report, the Commission told us that they believed a terrorist attack would occur somewhere in the world by 2013, and that it was more than likely to be an act of biological terrorism.

It is now 2013, and we recognize the possibility of a chemical, biological, radiological, or nuclear attack from both foreign and domestic actors. However, recognizing an attack does not equal being prepared for one. The WMD Commission concluded that the best strategy for biodefense was improving the ability to respond. Last Congress, this Committee held hearings on the threat from chemical, biological, radiological, and nuclear weapons.

During those hearings, our witness, Dr. Leonard Cole, who will also testify today, stated that response plans and exercises fall short of optimal levels. And planning that realistically incorporates federal, state, local and private sector resources into a unified WMD response is largely absent.

In order to successfully be prepared for a chemical, biological, radiological, or nuclear attack we must alter policy and ensure that first responders have the resources that are necessary to be effective. The first responder grant programs are important to preparedness and should be provided at adequate levels.

As we saw in Boston, the actions of first responders are critical. The actions of first responders are necessary in preventing a catastrophic loss in the wake of a chemical, biological, radiological, or nuclear attack.

I understand that today's testimony will highlight a Department of Homeland Security program that is designed to prevent radiological and nuclear attacks in two cities that are facing the highest risk. This program is in New York City and Los Angeles. I know that these cities are vulnerable and depend on first responders. I particularly know that New York City does because first responders from the Buffalo/Niagara region have assisted them in the wake of the horrific 9/11 attacks and the devastation from Hurricane Sandy.

We know that chemical, biological, radiological, or nuclear attacks could happen anywhere. Knowing this, there should be an incentive to properly fund first responders who consistently answer the call in the time of anyone's need. Along with readiness, information sharing among federal, state, and local agencies must be strong when it comes to intelligence involving potential chemical, biological, radiological, or nuclear attacks.

This Congress, I am an original co sponsor of H.R. 1542, which strengthens intelligence and information sharing about weapons of mass destruction. It is my hope that this bipartisan legislation will be voted favorably by this Committee. This legislation is a step in the right direction, but there still is work left to be done. First responders, in all areas of risk, need to be fully capable and equipped to handle an attack—this means full funding of state and local grant programs by the federal government.

This includes the Urban Area Security Initiative, or UASI. I will shortly be re-introducing legislation to once again provide a funding opportunity to communities like Buffalo and Niagara Falls for UASI, which were senselessly cut off from funding. Additionally, coordination needs to be improved among federal, state, and local officials to have a response that is expedient and efficient. I look forward to witness testimony today and to hearing how we can work more to close the gaps that exist and provide resources needed to ensure we are resilient.