

Opening Statement - Ranking Member Donald M. Payne, Jr. (D-NJ)

“Assessing the Nation’s State of Preparedness: A Federal, State, and Local Perspective”

Subcommittee on Emergency Preparedness, Response, and Communications

September 19, 2013

Before we begin this hearing, I want to express my condolences to those who lost loved ones, friends, and coworkers as a result of the tragic events at Navy Yard earlier this week. I also want to thank the first responders for their heroic efforts.

Last week, we commemorated the anniversary of the September, 11, 2001 attacks. In twelve years, we have made significant improvements in our preparedness capabilities – from planning to communications to operational coordination.

However, every day we are reminded of the work still that needs to be done. In the last year alone, we have witnessed incredible tragedies. Last year, Hurricane Sandy wreaked havoc along the East Coast and in my home state of New Jersey. It displaced families, destroyed schools and business, and disrupted the school year.

In December, a shooter killed 20 children and 6 adults at Sandy Hook elementary school. In April, terrorists detonated explosives at the Boston Marathon, killing three people and injuring many more. In May, tornados devastated Oklahoma. Two elementary schools were in the path of the tornado, and tragically, seven children died at one elementary school.

After each of these incidents, the nation collectively asks what could we have done differently? We wonder how we could have prevented them. If prevention is not possible, we wonder how we could have mitigated the devastation.

And if you are a parent, these tragedies cause you to wonder about how best to protect your children. Earlier this month, Save the Children released its annual Report Card on Protecting Children in Disasters. It found that 28 States, including the District of Columbia, do not require schools and child care facilities to include the four standards that the National Commission on Children and Disasters deemed essential.

I am proud to say that New Jersey is one of the few states that includes these four criteria. I encourage each member of the panel to review this report to determine whether your state meets each of the four criteria. And if your state does not meet the standard, I would urge the members to call their state officials and ask why.

And along with this individual advocacy, I believe that as a national legislative body, this Congress can and should do more. I am introducing the S.A.F.E. Schools Act, legislation that will require States applying for State Homeland Security Grant funds to certify that their schools have emergency plans that meet the standards recommended by the 2010 Commission on Children and Disasters Report.

I want to thank Save the Children for their support of my legislation, and for all of their hard work in making sure that our children remain a priority in our disaster planning and preparedness efforts.