Statement of Ranking Member Donald M. Payne, Jr.

"The Federal Emergency Management Agency's FY2015 Budget Request: Ensuring Effective Preparedness, Response, and Communications"

Subcommittee on Emergency Preparedness, Response, and Communications
March 25, 2014

I would like to thank Chairwoman Brooks for holding this hearing, and giving the Subcommittee the opportunity to learn more about the FY 15 budget request for the Federal Emergency Management Agency.

Earlier this month, Secretary Johnson testified before the Full Committee on the FY 15 budget submission for the Department of Homeland Security.

Members of this panel raised a litany of concerns, ranging from how future budget caps will affect operations to whether resources are being allocated effectively to enhance security.

There was one topic, however, that generated significant bipartisan interest: FEMA's proposal to consolidate 18 distinct homeland security grant programs into one.

This is not FEMA's first attempt at a widescale consolidation of these programs. It is the third attempt.

In the past, when Members asked about potential changes in how funding would be awarded under the consolidation proposal, FEMA stressed that it was not focused on the specifics of which cities receive funding. Instead, it was concerned about building national capabilities.

So before we go down this road for the third time, I want to be clear about where Members on this panel – at least on the Democratic side – are coming from.

The attacks of September 11, 2001 shook America to its core.

Prior to 9/11, we only saw disasters in terms of natural disasters – hurricanes, earthquakes, tornadoes.

Mother Nature can be vicious – but, over the years, thanks to investments in disaster preparedness and recovery, it is an enemy we can anticipate.

The attacks of September 11, in contrast, we did not see coming.

And, unlike a natural disaster, we did not know - at least initially - when it was over.

Despite our military strength, our intelligence resources, and first responder technologies, Americans learned that day that we are vulnerable to terrorism.

Unfortunately, last year, the Boston Marathon Bombings brought the unpredictable nature of terrorism into focus again.

Americans have come to understand that the might of our military will not stop terrorists from trying to attack our streets.

Fragments of intelligence only tell a full story if the information is shared with the right people.

I represent Newark, New Jersey.

I have seen first-hand the death and destruction caused by terrorist attacks and a natural disaster.

Both the 9/11 attacks and Hurricane Sandy were deadly, heart-breaking, and caused significant economic damage.

The nature of terrorism demands a very different preparedness, response, and mitigation approach than an approaching storm or other natural disaster.

New Jersey first responders were some of the first to attend to the aftermath of 9/11, and they again were called to respond following Hurricane Sandy. Depending on the type of disaster, what is asked of first responders is vastly different.

Ask any firefighter, what is demanded of him in response to a traditional fire is vastly different from what is required to respond to a blaze caused by an act of terrorism, where biological toxins may have been released or boobie-traps may have been laid.

In recognition of the difference and the need to build core terrorism preparedness and response capabilities, Congress established the Homeland Security Grant Program.

 So, as we begin our discussion on grant consolidation today, you will find that the concerns expressed about your proposal are fundamental.

What is at stake goes far beyond parochial considerations about who gets what money. It is about how we take the lessons learned since 9-11 to make our communities more secure.

In the absence of dedicated and discrete terrorism preparedness and response grant programs – which is exactly what would occur under your consolidation proposal— how can we be assured that the funds we appropriate will be used to achieve interoperability, harden and protect critical infrastructure, and address other vulnerabilities that were first identified by the 9/11 Commission?