

STATEMENT OF RANKING MEMBER BONNIE WATSON COLEMAN (D-NJ)

“Agents of Opportunity: Responding to the Threat of Chemical Terrorism”

Thursday, March, 19, 2015

On behalf of Mr. Payne, Jr., who could not be here today, I want to welcome Ms. McSally to the Emergency Preparedness, Response, and Communications Subcommittee and wish her well as the new Chairman.

I also would like to thank the witnesses for being here today, especially Sheriff Fontoura who traveled from New Jersey to testify before us today. My home State of New Jersey, is home of a stretch of highway that the *New York Times* has coined “the most dangerous two miles in America.”

Interspersed between homes and commuter corridors, there are 100 potential terrorist targets– including a chlorine plant that, if comprised, could injure up to 12 million people.

The threat of chemical attacks is not new. Twenty years ago, terrorists in Japan released Sarin gas on Tokyo subway system. Over 5,000 were injured, many of whom were first responders and healthcare workers who experienced secondary exposure because appropriate response protocols did not exist.

Within five years of the Tokyo attack, our law enforcement thwarted two significant plots: one by a Ku Klux Klan-affiliate against a natural gas facility and the other by a right-wing extremist organization against a bulk propane storage facility.

Although I understand that the risk of a catastrophic chemical attack is relatively low, terrorist organizations have demonstrated an interest in acquiring chemical weapons. Just last weekend, Kurdish authorities in Iraq alleged that ISIL has used chemical weapons on two separate occasions this winter.

And we already know that there is the risk that chemical facilities will be targeted. While I want to be careful not to sound alarmist, the consequences of a chemical incident on our communities, and the people who live and work in them, are too significant for us to ignore the threat.

Terrorism aside, the explosion at the West, Texas chemical facility in April 2013 was a grave reminder of the potential lethality of chemical explosions. Regardless of whether an explosion is the result of terrorism or an accident, the same first responders are called to action and the safety of the same people is jeopardized.

We have to make sure our communities and our first responders are informed of the risks and prepared to respond. With that said, I look forward to learning more about the Baltimore Demonstration Project, how gaps in capabilities and operating procedures were identified, and how they are being resolved. I am also interested to know the extent to which other cities have been able to use the lessons learned from the Baltimore Demonstration Project to inform their own chemical incident response planning.

From our emergency responders, I will be interested to learn whether you have adequate information related to the risk of potential chemical incidents in your community, whether through fusion centers and JTTFs or from direct relationships with chemical facilities. I am also interested to know about the availability of training opportunities and if your organizations have the resources to send responders to them.

Once again, on behalf of Mr. Payne, Jr., I thank Chairman McSally for holding the Subcommittee’s first hearing on such an important – and I think all too often overlooked – topic, and I look forward to the witnesses’ testimony.