

OPENING STATEMENT OF RANKING MEMBER DONALD M. PAYNE, JR.

“Strategic Perspectives on the Bioterrorism Threat”

Subcommittee on Emergency Preparedness, Response, and Communications

Wednesday, April 20, 2015

I want to thank Chairman McSally for continuing the Subcommittee’s work on ensuring that we understand - and are prepared to respond to -the threats posed by bioterrorism. Just over a year ago, this Subcommittee examined the history of bioterrorism threats, how bio-threats are evolving, and whether the Federal government is doing what it needs to do to prevent and effectively respond to acts of bioterrorism.

The message from that hearing was clear: When it comes to biodefense, there is a leadership vacuum. Ten months after the hearing, that leadership vacuum became publicly apparent as the Federal government struggled to effectively coordinate its response to the U.S. Ebola cases.

Despite billions of dollars of investment in developing capabilities to prevent and respond to a bioterror event, the lack of a comprehensive Federal strategy effectively coordinated by someone at the highest level of government undermines every dollar we spend.

That is why last Congress, I supported the *WMD Prevention and Preparedness Act*, which was introduced by my New Jersey Colleague, Congressman Bill Pascrell, and former Chairman Peter King. That legislation would have implemented the recommendations made in the 2008 WMD Commission Report and, importantly, re-established the position of Special Assistant to the President on Biodefense. Although the bill did not move in this Committee last Congress, I am hopeful that it will be reintroduced, and that the lessons learned from the Ebola crisis last fall will incentivize this Committee and Congress to act on it.

As I have observed throughout my tenure in Congress, the attention of this body and its Federal partners ebbs and flows from crisis to crisis, and I hope that we address the bio-preparedness gaps we observed last year before we become complacent and the next crisis shocks us back into action.

Along those lines, I am interested to hear Senator Talent’s views on the threats posed by bioterrorism, the potential of lone-wolf actors, and how we should prioritize our efforts with respect to addressing bio-threats. Despite some challenges at the Federal level, I am encouraged to hear about efforts local public health departments are undertaking to ensure that they will be able to protect the public should a bio-event occur.

Initially, I would like to commend Deputy Commissioner Raphael on New York City’s successful response to the Ebola case last fall, and I will be interested in understanding how the City became prepared to respond so effectively and whether information shared by the Federal government was consistent, coordinated, and useful.

Before an Ebola case was diagnosed in the U.S., New York City was working to improve its bio-response capabilities by testing its plans to rapidly deploy countermeasures following an anthrax attack in its largest, no-notice emergency response exercise to date. I am interested in learning about how lessons learned from previous exercises informed the plans tested last summer, what New York City learned from the August exercise, and whether the lessons learned are being shared with neighboring jurisdictions.

Finally, I would note that our counterparts on the Appropriations Committee are in the process of drafting the FY 2016 funding bills as we speak. I would be remiss if I did not take this opportunity to highlight the important role grant programs like the Urban Area Security Initiative have played in developing local capabilities to prepare for and respond to bio-threats.

I urge our colleagues to provide robust funding for UASI and to consider restoring funding for reduced or expired grant programs that bolstered medical response capabilities, such as the Metropolitan Medical Response system.