

## **Opening Statement – Ranking Member Donald Payne Jr.**

### **Subcommittee on Emergency Preparedness, Response, and Communications**

#### **“Improving the Department of Homeland Security’s Biological Detection and Surveillance Programs”**

**Thursday, February 11, 2016**

DHS has a critical role to play in the biodefense space. I am glad that Ms. McSally shares my commitment to ensuring that the Department’s programs are responsive to the current threat environment and make meaningful contributions to help prevent and protect against a biological incident.

I joined this Committee in January 2013, and have served as Ranking Member on this Subcommittee ever since. At that time, the Office of Health Affairs was conducting the “Analysis of Alternatives” for the BioWatch Gen-3 “lab-in-a-box” and implementing its 2012 Strategic Plan for the National Biosurveillance Integration Center. The Gen-3 acquisition was ultimately canceled, questions about Gen-2 were ongoing, and we took the “wait and see” approach with NBIC, hoping that with time and a new strategy, it would successfully achieve its mandate.

I find it remarkable that today I sit here with a new Subcommittee Chairman asking many of the same questions I was asking three years ago. I have met with both Dr. Brinsfield and Dr. Brothers privately, and expressed my concern about the lack of progress in identifying technology to replace the current BioWatch system.

Although I have been assured that progress is underway, the Chair and I have met with representatives from the private sector and they did not share that optimism. Further, both the Blue Ribbon Study Panel on Biodefense and the Government Accountability Office have recently questioned the benefit of both NBIC and the deployed BioWatch technology. With respect to NBIC, the Blue Ribbon Panel acknowledged the challenges that OHA has experienced with respect to gaining access to information without an enforcement mechanism and urged OHA to innovate on identifying new data sources.

GAO raised similar concerns with respect to information access and suggested that NBIC could further clarify its mission to ensure that its work added to the national biosurveillance capability. That said, I do not know how OHA can address these challenges or clarify its mission under its current budget or the reduced resources sought under the President’s Fiscal Year 2017 Budget request. Together, the message from GAO and the Blue Ribbon Study Panel is that the NBIC cannot carry on with a “business as usual” mentality. I will be interested to learn how NBIC has internalized this message.

With respect to BioWatch, GAO recently found that DHS lacks a full understanding of the deployed system’s detection capabilities. The Blue Ribbon Study Panel amplified the system’s limitations by outlining a series of shortcomings, from relying on “winds blowing in optimal directions,” to its inability to distinguish normal background bacteria from dangerous pathogens, to its inability to detect atypical threats.

Although the Department is adamant that BioWatch can achieve its operational objective - to detect a catastrophic biological event that would cause 10,000 casualties – I am not convinced that that objective is responsive to the current threat environment.

Before I yield back, I would be remiss if I did not note that the President’s FY 2017 budget request proposes devastating cuts to terrorism preparedness grants that first responders in my district rely on. The budget would cut \$267 million from the State Homeland Security Grant Program, \$270 million from the Urban Area Security Initiative, \$15 million from Transit Grants, and \$7 million from Port Grants. It is penny-wise and pound-foolish to make such cuts even to these effective programs. The Federal dollars we spend yield concrete capabilities at the State and local level.

Getting back to the subject at hand, I have to say that it is hard to justify funding for programs whose value is questioned year after year when essential first responder grants are being axed. I am committed to putting DHS’ biodefense efforts on the right track, but I have a hard time going to bat for programs that appear to be stagnant, particularly in the current budget environment.