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The Honorable James R. Langevin
Opening Statement – “One Year Later – Implementing the
Biosurveillance Requirements of the 9/11 Act”
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Good Afternoon. I would like to thank my colleagues for their participation and I welcome our witnesses here today. As this committee is well aware, the threat of a biological attack is real and potentially catastrophic. As Chairman of this subcommittee, I have made it a priority to address the most glaring vulnerabilities facing our nation, and this is certainly one of them. Of equal or greater concern is the possibility that a naturally occurring disease outbreak could grow to epidemic proportions. We have held numerous hearings on how to better protect against biological attack and today we are continuing those efforts.

Today, our focus will be on determining whether the biosurveillance requirements included in the Implementing Recommendations of the 9/11 Commission Act of 2007 (9/11 Act), which became law on August 3rd, 2007, have been properly implemented. The 9/11 Act included two key sections regarding our nation's biosurveillance capabilities: Section 1101 authorized the National Biosurveillance Integration Center, or NBIC; and Section 1102 requires the Government Accountability Office (GAO) to submit a report to Congress describing all federal, state and local biosurveillance efforts. Each of these, if properly implemented, will help protect against biological threats, whether manmade or natural. The key to stopping an outbreak from becoming an epidemic – or an attack from becoming a catastrophe - is early detection, identification, tracking, and response.

The National Biosurveillance Integration Center (NBIC) and the BioWatch program – housed at the Department of Homeland Security – are critical to this mission. Each of these programs is designed to provide early detection of disease outbreaks – a critical tool in preventing or containing their spread. The NBIC was created to fulfill the requirements of Homeland Security Presidential Directive 9 (HSPD-9), *Defense of U.S. Food and Agriculture*, issued in January 2004. NBIC's mission is “to develop robust, comprehensive, and fully coordinated surveillance and monitoring systems, including international information, for animal disease, plant disease, wildlife disease, food, public health, and water quality that provides early detection and awareness of disease, pest, or poison agents.” Section 1101 of the 9/11 Act authorized the NBIC and set a deadline of September 30, 2008, for full operation. I am concerned that, although progress has been made, most estimates are that we are still two years from having the full participation of federal, state, local, tribal, private sector, and international partners that a robust biosurveillance capability requires. I'm hopeful that our witnesses can shed some light on the current obstacles to getting the NBIC operational.

I also look forward to hearing from our witnesses on the status of the BioWatch program, which consists of two components: research and development activities on the next generation biodetectors are run by the DHS Science and Technology Directorate; while acquisition, operations, and management are now handled by the Office of Health Affairs (OHA). Today we will focus on the current state of both NBIC and BioWatch. While I am concerned that each of these programs has lingering problems, I am hopeful that this hearing will help to provide a course to overcome current obstacles and move these programs forward.