

Opening Statement of  
Senator Susan M. Collins

**“Watching the Watch List: Building an Effective  
Terrorist Screening System”**

Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs  
October 24, 2007

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**[Thank you - commend] The use of the terrorist watch list inspires both confidence and concern - confidence that our counterterrorism agencies are determined to detect and disrupt the travels of those who would do us harm, but also concern that this increased security may come at a cost to privacy and civil liberties.**

**The 9/11 Commission noted that as many as 15 of the 19 hijackers might have been intercepted by border authorities if a procedure had been in place**

**to link previously accumulated information to their names. Several of the hijackers had been cited in intelligence-community files for terrorist links.**

**Existing but untapped data on travel patterns, bogus visa applications, and fraudulent passport information could have focused attention on some of the terrorists. Prior to the attacks of September 11, 2001, however, the government had no such system.**

**Based on its review, the 9/11 Commission recommended that the federal government design a comprehensive screening system to help frontline officials at our borders and other critical points confirm the identity of people trying to enter our country or to board airplanes and to disrupt their plans if they pose a security threat.**

**The need for effective information sharing and for tools to track terrorists' movements is self-evident. But if these databases contain information that is inaccurate, obsolete, or error-prone, then watch lists can be both ineffective and unfair. Suspects who pose a security threat can pass unimpeded if they are not listed or if technical problems prevent their identification.**

**On the other hand, all of us have heard from innocent constituents who have had the misfortune to share a similar name or other identifying data with a suspect on the watch list. Individuals who do not belong on the list can face frustrating delays every time they travel and can find it difficult to get erroneous information corrected.**

**In addition, volumes of personal information in the hands of government can present a tempting target for identity thieves.**

**Creating and maintaining a comprehensive terrorist watch list is an enormous endeavor fraught with technical and tactical challenges. On the technical side, integrating information from multiple government databases and then transmitting that information securely and accurately is no easy task. To be useful to our officers in the field, the watch list must provide reliable information that can be quickly evaluated and used as a basis for action.**

**The GAO report that we release today, and the DOJ Inspector General's report that we received last month, provide us with the means to review the**

**screening process and assess its strengths and vulnerabilities.**

**The GAO details the use of watch lists by law enforcement over a 42-month period. Federal, state, and local officials had more than 53,000 encounters with individuals on watch lists during that period.**

**Unfortunately, there are examples of targeted individuals passing through screening undetected. A particularly troubling problem has been the failure to detect individuals on the “No Fly” list before they board a U.S.-bound aircraft overseas. In some cases, the government’s response to delayed detection has diverted planes for an emergency landing – including several to the Bangor, Maine, Airport – so that the suspicious individual could be questioned, detained, or refused entry.**

**These reports underscore the need to make the watch lists more accurate and timely and to improve the system for seeking redress if individuals believe they have been wrongfully targeted. My understanding is that the Terrorist Screening Center is working with the GAO and the Inspector General to implement their recommendations.**

**Any system that relies on judgments made by personnel in different agencies applying varying standards will never be perfect, particularly when large, complex databases are involved. It is, nevertheless, imperative that improvements be made so that the American people can have more confidence and less concern about this safeguard against terrorist attacks.**

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