

Opening Statement of
Senator Susan M. Collins
Committee on Homeland Security
and Governmental Affairs

“A DHS Status Report: Assessing Challenges
and Measuring Progress”

September 6, 2007

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After the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, the U.S. government launched the largest reorganization in its history to strengthen coordination among the 22 agencies with responsibilities for protecting our nation. We established the Department of Homeland Security.

More than four years have passed since DHS opened for business on March 1, 2003. As Senator Lieberman stated, our nation is safer than prior to 9-11-01, but threats continue to evolve and intensify.

Violent extremists, both foreign and home-grown, remain determined to attack Americans. Natural disasters continue to challenge our communities' abilities to prepare, respond, and rebuild.

Meanwhile, global commerce, travel, and new drug-resistant microbes raise the risks of pandemic disease.

DHS officials and staff have worked hard to enhance our security. We have been spared a new terrorist attack on the U.S. mainland since 2001, and the people of DHS deserve a measure of credit for that. As we all know, however, the Department has also encountered difficulties and setbacks in performing its vital mission.

Today, we will attempt to assess the Department's performance accurately and fairly,

noting its successes, its failures, and its “incompletes.” When Senator Lieberman and I asked the Government Accountability Office last year to perform a status check on DHS’s first four years, we knew that we were asking for a major assessment. The 320 pages in this new GAO report are proof of that.

I also expected that DHS would receive a mixed report card. Reviewing the grades fairly, however, does require a word of context. As the GAO notes, “successful transformations of large organizations, even those faced with less strenuous reorganizations than DHS, can take 5 to 7 years to achieve.”

Applying the GAO’s measure of “performance expectations” to 14 key DHS mission areas yielded indications of “moderate” or “substantial” progress

in six areas, including key concerns like aviation security and maritime security. Four other areas were judged to show “modest” progress.

That DHS should be a work in progress after only four years should surprise no one. It is, however, disturbing to see “limited progress” in four areas as critical as human-capital management, information-technology management, science and technology, and emergency preparedness and response.

The “limited progress” grade in emergency preparedness and response deserves additional comment. The GAO does document some progress, such as grant programs to improve interoperable communications for first responders. I would also note that some positive developments resulting from

last year's FEMA reform legislation are not reflected in GAO's analysis. FEMA now has regional centers with defense coordinating officers and multi-agency strike teams, multiplying its readiness to deliver rapid and effective assistance tailored to each region of the country. FEMA has also improved its capability to pre-position vital supplies and to track their deployment. I have seen these improvements first-hand in a regional exercise, and they are encouraging.

Unfortunately, GAO found only limited progress in establishing an all-hazards national response plan, developing national all-hazards preparedness goals, and coordinating implementation of a national incident-management system. These are troubling "incompletes." No amount of investment in technology and in aid to first responders can

compensate for the lack of well-developed and well-understood goals and procedures for coordinated response. We must have better results here.

The highest score GAO awarded was in an area that this Committee has worked very hard to improve: maritime security. In this area, the GAO found that DHS had achieved more than 75 percent of performance expectations.

We now have national plans for maritime security, response, and recovery. DHS reports that it will be able to perform radiation scanning on 98 percent of incoming cargo by year's end. We have new programs to improve security at foreign ports. These are just a few of the accomplishments noted by the GAO.

Another topic that has occupied a great deal of our attention is acquisition management. This Committee has examined appalling instances of waste and fraud in responses to hurricanes and in Iraq and Afghanistan. In light of those investigations, it is troubling that GAO found that DHS still lacks clear, department-wide acquisition policies and suffers from acquisition staff shortages. The Department must redouble its efforts, because faulty acquisition not only wastes taxpayer dollars, but also can cost lives if vital supplies are lacking or cannot be moved swiftly to aid victims.

Nearly six years after September 11, 2001, four years after its creation, and two years after Hurricane Katrina, the Department must pick up the pace of its progress. GAO's report should serve as a roadmap in this effort. With so much at stake and so

many areas where progress is still required, America cannot settle for a mixed report card.

I welcome the Comptroller General and the Under Secretary to our hearing, and look forward to a productive discussion.

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