



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Statement of Chairman Bennie G. Thompson

“Protecting the Protectors: Ensuring the Health and Safety of our First Responders in the Wake of Catastrophic Disasters”

September 20, 2007 (Washington) – Today, Committee on Homeland Security Chairman Bennie G. Thompson (D-MS) delivered the following prepared remarks for the full Committee hearing entitled “Protecting the Protectors: Ensuring the Health and Safety of our First Responders in the Wake of Catastrophic Disasters”:

“Following the collapse of the World Trade Center, approximately 40,000 responders involved in the rescue, recovery, and cleanup were exposed to a mixture of dust, debris and smoke filled with lethal substances.

As time has gone on, firefighters, law enforcement officers, EMTs, and workers in the construction trades increasingly have gotten sick, most often with respiratory illnesses.

I look forward to hearing from our witnesses on the status of the various medical monitoring and treatment programs that have been put into place to address these issues at the site of the World Trade Center.

Subsequently, in August of 2005, Hurricane Katrina devastated the Gulf Coast, flooding 80% of the city of New Orleans city with up to 15 feet of water.

Millions of gallons of oil were released from storage facilities and tons of wreckage from abandoned cars, homes, and refrigerators were left in its wake.

First responders – who came from all over the country to help the residents of Louisiana, and my home state of Mississippi – were exposed to filthy floodwater filled with agricultural and industrial waste and sewage.

However, there currently is not a system in place to adequately track their health and I worry that the long-term impacts may never be completely known.

In addition, we cannot forget the psychological trauma that our first responders are exposed to during tragedies like 9/11, Katrina and the Oklahoma City bombing.

While working in these situations, they see things, and have experiences, that take a serious toll on their mental well-being. This often leads to post-traumatic stress disorder.

Currently, FEMA will fund short-term crisis counseling, but Federal assistance does not extend to psychiatric – and often long-term – treatment for conditions that stem from disasters. We need to examine whether the Federal government should do more in this area.

Effective health and safety should not be limited to monitoring and treating our heroes after they get sick. We should also be focused on preventive measures.

No firefighter, law enforcement officer, or EMT should go without the personnel protective equipment or training they need to be safe.

The various Federal first responder grant programs are critical in accomplishing this goal, and we must reverse the trend of budget cuts we have seen in recent years for many of these programs.

In addition, while the issue of interoperable communications is not often considered a health and safety issue, it absolutely is. Many firefighters who lost their lives in the World Trade Center on 9/11 could have been saved if they had better communications.

Finally, while I believe it is crucial to examine what went wrong in past disasters, and how we are taking care of our sick emergency workers, I hope we can translate the lessons learned from these tragedies into positive changes.

However, I still have my doubts whether there has been sufficient planning and coordination between and among all of the relevant Federal agencies.

Everyone needs to know their respective roles and responsibilities in the areas of worker safety and medical monitoring.

Unfortunately, this country again will have to face another 9/11 or Katrina. We must act now to ensure that we protect those who bravely put their lives on the line to protect us. “

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