

**Opening Statement for Chairman Joseph Lieberman
Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee
“Nuclear Terrorism: Providing Medical Care and Meeting Basic Needs in the
Aftermath.”
May 15, 2008**

Good morning, This is the fourth in a series of hearings in which we are exploring our country’s capacity to react to a terrorist detonation of a nuclear weapon in an American city.

Some may think it is impossible that terrorists could acquire such a devastating weapon but our previous hearings have shown that the terrorists’ desire to acquire nuclear weapons is clear and their capacity to do so is real. At our last hearing we learned that, a 10-kiloton nuclear blast in a major American city would have a devastating affect on life and property, But we also learned something that is counter-intuitive, much of the city would survive. The effect on the area of impact would be horrific thousands would be killed but what we learned is that thousands more could be saved if we are prepared to respond quickly and effectively.

Helping survivors in and around the blast area will require a planned, prepared and coordinated response by all levels of government. The federal government will have to bring all its capabilities to the attacked area quickly because local government will be overwhelmed.

As our witnesses will make clear, we do not presently have either enough coordinated planning or enough assets, to respond to a terrorist nuclear attack to save the thousands of American lives we know we will be able to save.

For example, we know that among the survivors will be tens of thousands of burn victims. But on any given day there are only 200 open burn beds across our entire nation.

We know that our medical surge capacity is grossly insufficient. But have no comprehensive plan for dealing with these kinds of casualties in these kinds of numbers.

This has to change. The sad truth is that many of our most valuable resources across the nation will go unused in a

nuclear catastrophe because of a lack of prior planning And coordinating

We must decide before an attack how we can bring the entire nation's resources to bear as quickly as possible, including surge medical providers, mobile care facilities, and pharmaceutical supplies.

We need to fund innovative ways to treat people in alternative settings until they can be safely transferred to traditional hospitals, We must integrate and utilize medical volunteers. But first we must undertake a frank assessment of what our medical surge capability across the private, civilian and military sectors really is.

We also know we will need to feed and shelter those who are not injured but who have been forced from their homes.

This morning American Red Cross – the largest provider of shelter and feeding in disasters will tell us this morning that it has been forced to cut its national staff by 40 percent because

of a shrinking budget, leaving America potentially less prepared to deal with a disaster or catastrophe than we were just last year.

We need to make sure the Red Cross and other national and community based organizations are included in planning efforts, and that the federal government is prepared for catastrophes where traditional sheltering is not enough. And we need to carefully direct federal efforts to the Red Cross.

We need to ask tough questions as to how we are going to decontaminate a million people so they don't make other displaced citizens sick.

We must integrate the logistical and supply capabilities of our federal and private partners with the volunteer organizations that are actually supplying the beds, the bread, and the emotional comfort.

The single most effective way to save lives immediately after a nuclear explosion may be through effective communications.

We need to have systems in place to advise people in and around the area of the radioactive plume whether they should stay put or evacuate.

This determination must be made almost immediately, and it must be disseminated without delay through media networks that will reach all the public, in terms that everyone can understand.

We cannot afford to wait, and we certainly cannot rely on canned, untested messages when the stakes are so high. We must identify trusted spokespeople who can deliver credible information that will be effective at convincing the population as to their safest course of action.

Finally we must acknowledge that the government cannot do it all, We must convince the American people that they are responsible for their own families' preparedness.

People should stock their homes and places of business with emergency supplies in case one day they are needed as shelters in the aftermath of an attack or a natural disaster.

They should know where they would go if told to evacuate, how to communicate with loved ones, and how they can help respond if needed by their communities.

These preparations would be useful not just in case of a terrorist nuclear attack, but also a chemical attack or a natural disaster that forces people to shelter in place until help arrives.

The possibility of a terrorist attack using nuclear weapons is hard to absorb, – but it is definitely possible. So we must begin asking the right questions and then making the right preparations now. The day after is too late.

Senator Collins.