

Statement of
Senator Susan M. Collins

The Department of Homeland Security's
Budget Submission for Fiscal Year 2009

Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs
February 14, 2008

★ ★ ★

The Department of Homeland Security is now approaching its fifth anniversary. It has made considerable progress in the past few years. But we also know from this Committee's oversight work, from GAO and IG reports, and from Secretary Chertoff's prior testimony, that much remains to be done to integrate, improve, and strengthen the Department's ability to confront the threats that are facing us and to deliver services and implement programs more effectively.

The Administration's Fiscal Year 2009 budget proposal for DHS contemplates a 4.6 percent

increase in outlays from last year's levels and funds some worthwhile initiatives. The budget proposal must recognize that the risks of catastrophic natural disasters and terrorist attacks will not go away, that our borders and coastlines must be made more secure, and that our nation's infrastructure, including seaports and chemical plants, must be protected.

Yet the President's budget actually reduces funding for nearly every program that supports the preparedness and prevention programs of state and local governments.

A bedrock assumption of the National Response Framework is that first responders and state and local emergency managers will typically be the first to arrive at the scene of any disaster, even though

massive federal aid and support may soon follow. These first responders also serve as a critical line of defense against terrorist attacks – whether they are a county sheriff patrolling northern Maine near the border or an NYPD officer investigating a pipe-bomb threat. The unpredictability of disasters and terrorist activity underscores the practical necessity for partnership and coordination at all levels of government.

States rely heavily on State Homeland Security Grants for emergency planning, risk assessments, mutual-aid agreements, equipment, training, and exercises for first responders. That is why I am very concerned about the nearly \$700 million gap between this year’s budget for State Homeland Security Grant funding and what Congress enacted last year.

The proposed funding of only \$210 million instead of \$400 million for Port Security Grants and the lack of any funding for important grant programs like the SAFER grants for firefighters, interoperable communications grants, and the direct assistance to purchase commercial equipment for emergency response providers could have disastrous consequences for emergency preparedness, prevention, and deterrence.

Federal funding has enhanced our nation's ability to protect transportation systems, ports, chemical facilities, and other critical infrastructure, but more assistance is needed.

There are some positive elements in the budget. I applaud the DHS proposal to upgrade vehicle-lane technology at the top 39 land ports of entry and to

increase customs officer numbers, including at ports of entry in the Maine towns of Calais, Houlton, and Madawaska. The funding increases for FEMA, Customs and Border Protection, and the Coast Guard are also notable, as is the increased funding to place a Protective Security Advisor in every state.

The Department is also taking initial steps to fund updates to the severely outdated computer system now deployed at the ports of entry.

Weaknesses in this system helped a Mexican national with multi-drug-resistant tuberculosis enter the United States undetected 21 times, even though DHS knew his last name, middle name, and birth date.

The current system cannot perform many basic search functions that ordinary citizens use on free, Web-based search engines every day.

On the critical and growing need to counter the threat of terrorist bombs, I am also disturbed to see that the DHS budget cuts the current \$10 million funding for the Office of Bombing Prevention by more than \$800,000. This funding falls far short of the \$25 million funding level sought in the bombing-prevention bill Chairman Lieberman and I introduced last fall. Our funding plan was based on serious discussions with experts, so I hope that we can reverse the thinking embodied in this budget item.

I look forward to a good discussion of the rationale for the DHS budget proposal in this hearing.

#