

Statement of Senator Susan M. Collins
Homeland Security Grant Enhancement Act
June 12, 2003

Mr. President, I rise today to introduce legislation, the Homeland Security Grant Enhancement Act, to streamline and strengthen the way we help our states, communities, and first responders protect our homeland. I am pleased to be joined by a number of my colleagues including Senators Carper, Rockefeller, Voinovich, Feingold, Sununu, Coleman, Pryor, Allard, and Akaka.

Last year, the Senate spent nearly three months on the Homeland Security Act, yet the law contains virtually no guidance on how the Department is to assist state and local governments with their homeland security needs. In fact, the 187-page Homeland Security Act mentions the issue of grants to first responders in but *a single paragraph*. As a result, the Department of Homeland Security currently allocates billions of dollars of grant funds according to formulas borrowed from the USA Patriot Act. The Homeland Security Act left the decisions on how federal dollars should be spent or how much money should be allocated for another day. Today is that day.

Much of the burden for homeland security has fallen on the shoulders of state and local officials across America, especially our first responders – the firefighters, police officers and ambulance crews on the front lines. Over the past months, the Committee on Governmental Affairs has listened to them describe the challenges associated with constructing effective homeland security strategies. We have also listened to state and local officials as well as Department of Homeland Security Secretary Tom Ridge. This series of three hearings looked at the issues from a variety of perspectives and helped shape the legislation we introduce today.

At our first hearing, we heard from first responders: our firefighters, law enforcement officials, and emergency medical technicians, who discussed the challenges they face protecting our communities.

Arlington Fire Chief Ed Plaugher, the incident commander at the Pentagon on September 11th, told the Committee that he had received little homeland security funding since 9-11. Chief Plaugher also underscored the gaps in the homeland security planning process. Many law enforcement officials shared Chief Plaugher's concerns. Portland, Maine, Police Chief Mike Chitwood, for example, expressed his frustrations about the roadblocks to accessing federal funding and the lack of coordination by Federal agencies with local jurisdictions.

Secretary Ridge testified at our second hearing. He discussed the ongoing challenges involved in providing federal resources to states, communities and first responders. He also outlined ways we can improve the efficiency and effectiveness of homeland security grant programs to help first responders get the resources they need.

Secretary Ridge's comments underscored the need to improve the way the Department of Homeland Security's first responder grant programs are organized within the Department, and the way the Department distributes these grants.

The Committee's third hearing featured state and local officials who expressed their support for more flexibility, coordination, and simplification of federal homeland security grant programs.

Maine's emergency manager, Art Cleaves, said the current maze of homeland security programs has caused so much paperwork that states may be forced to hire additional staff just to deal with a multiplicity of forms and planning documents.

Other witnesses, including Governor Mitt Romney of Massachusetts, outlined the need for coordinating homeland security funding across the Federal government. Their comments underscored how communities can access funding for interoperable communications equipment through six different federal programs, including the FIRE Act, COPS, two Department of Health and Human Services' bio-terrorism grant programs, FEMA's Emergency Management Performance Account, and ODP's state homeland security grant program. Despite the unified goals of these grants - to purchase interoperable equipment - federal agencies are under no requirement to coordinate their efforts.

While state and local officials agreed on the need to coordinate programs and make it easier to apply for grants, Mayor Kwame Kilpatrick and Governor Romney commented on the differences between states and localities regarding how best to allocate funds, through states or directly to the local level.

I am pleased that these hearings have helped to build a consensus on this issue. Yesterday, I received a letter from state and local organizations including the National League of Cities, the National Association of Counties, and the National Governors Association, which have come together in support of our approach, to provide funds through states, but to require that eighty percent be passed through to the local level.

Our legislation will provide a map that will better connect our front-line protectors with the funding they need. It will eliminate duplicative homeland security planning requirements; make it easier to apply for grants; coordinate the many grant programs that provide homeland security funds; and promote a community-based approach to homeland security funding. I would like to briefly describe the approach we have taken.

The first provision of our legislation would promote the same kind of coordination among federal agencies that we require of our states and localities. It would require federal

agencies to build a clear, well-marked path that would lead our first responders to the funding that enables them to do what they do best: prepare for and respond to emergencies.

Second, the legislation would coordinate government-wide homeland security funding by promoting one-stop-shopping for homeland security funding opportunities. It would establish an information clearinghouse to assist first responders and state and local governments in accessing homeland security grant information and other resources within the new department. The clearinghouse would improve access to homeland security grant information, coordinate technical assistance for vulnerability and threat assessments, provide information regarding homeland security best practices, and compile information regarding homeland security equipment purchased with Federal funds.

The legislation also recognizes the importance of building on existing successful programs, such as the FIRE Act, which provides funding directly to fire departments for equipment and training on a competitive, peer reviewed basis. It would allow the FIRE Act to continue to be administered in its current form, but would coordinate its activities with other Federal programs. For example, it would make sure that two neighboring jurisdictions receiving funding from the FIRE Act are aware of industry standards regarding the interoperability of communications equipment.

The third provision of our legislation would strengthen the Office for Domestic Preparedness' State Homeland Security Grant Program by simplifying the grant process, promoting more local input in homeland security funding, and promoting more flexibility in the use of funds.

The lack of guidance in the Homeland Security Act has forced state and local governments and first responders to engage in a 12-step odyssey to obtain funding from ODP's state homeland security grant program. And this program is just one of several homeland security grant programs to which a state, locality, police or fire department can apply.

The legislation distills the homeland security grant process from twelve steps to two. First, state and local governments and emergency responders will develop a three-year homeland security plan that outlines vulnerabilities and capabilities, and a process for allocating resources to meet state and local needs. This plan will also require the development of measurable goals and objectives, such as increasing the number of local jurisdictions participating in local and statewide exercises. Second, states and communities will apply for funds based on this plan, which they can revise each year pending approval from the Secretary.

This legislation would ensure that local government officials and first responders have a louder voice in the homeland security planning process and can access homeland security dollars

and equipment in an efficient manner. It would also require that 80 percent of these resources reach the local level within 60 days of the grant allocation.

When I met with the Maine fire chiefs, they expressed concerns about the lack of flexibility in homeland security funding, especially in the area of overtime costs for training. They told me that since homeland security funds cannot be used for most overtime costs, some of Maine's firefighters have been forced to turn down training opportunities at the National Fire Academy. Because there was no funding to pay the overtime costs for someone to fill in while the firefighter trained at the Academy, they had to forego this valuable training opportunity.

Our legislation would address their concerns by allowing funds to be used not only for planning, equipment, exercises and training, but also for certain overtime costs associated with training activities.

Our legislation also recognizes that certain high threat areas have critical vulnerabilities that must be addressed immediately. This legislation will direct the Secretary to use ten percent of total funding for this program to address these critical vulnerabilities. While this provision provides flexibility, it requires that any direct funding be consistent with the state plan. Furthermore, this legislation formally authorizes the Emergency Management Preparedness Grant, which provides resources to the backbone of our emergency management structure, and ensures an adequate level of funding under this program.

While some states and communities face a more imminent threat, our nation must provide for the safety of all of our citizens. This grant program maintains the current baseline level of homeland security assistance to each state. It then allocates the bulk of the funds not based solely on population, as is the case now, but on risk assessments undertaken for each state.

Right now, states and localities must complete numerous homeland security plans, each with its own set of questions and benchmarks. Terrorists will not be deterred by paperwork or by communities answering the same question six different ways.

That's why our legislation would streamline the planning process by requiring a single set of cooperatively developed performance standards to help states and localities evaluate homeland security plans.

When I met with officials of Maine's Emergency Management Agency, they told me that the rigid structure of many homeland security grant programs frustrates their efforts to help first responders secure communities across our state.

In past years, for example, the Office for Domestic Preparedness' homeland security grant program allocated the same percentage of each state's funds for training, equipment, exercises, and planning, thus leaving no room to accommodate different states' priorities. In

allocating funds this way, the federal government effectively said that Maine must spend exactly the same portion of its homeland security dollars on training as Hawaii. Moreover, states cannot transfer surplus funds from one category to another to meet their needs.

As a result, Maine may be forced to return some of the Homeland Security funds allocated for exercises. This one size fits all formula used in past homeland security funding makes no sense. I believe all states and communities should have the flexibility to spend homeland security dollars where they are most needed. That is why this legislation would allow flexibility in homeland security funds that have already been appropriated but remain unspent.

The current homeland security grant structure is unacceptable. Secretary Ridge has done an admirable job distributing billions of dollars of homeland security funds based on borrowed authorities and with no real guidance. It is time to deal the Secretary a full hand of cards and to give our states, localities and first responders a straight path to homeland security programs, not a maze. We must topple the mountain of paperwork. We must help, not hinder, our front-line defenders.

I urge my colleagues to join me in sponsoring this legislation to build a stronger and better homeland security partnership in the months and years ahead.

Thank you, Mr. President. I yield the floor.