

COMMONWEALTH OF PENNSYLVANIA

**Testimony Presented to:
U. S. House of Representatives
Committee on Homeland Security
Subcommittee on Emergency Communications, Preparedness and Response**

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September 10, 2007

Congressman Dent and members of the sub-committee on Emergency Communications, Preparedness and Response, on behalf of Governor Rendell, I thank you for this opportunity to discuss Pennsylvania's disaster preparedness, response and recovery programs.

Tomorrow marks the anniversary of the tragic events that occurred six years ago in New York City, the Pentagon and Somerset County Pennsylvania. Very few events in the history of this nation so dramatically impacted and forever altered our American way of life. The personal freedoms that stood as the foundation of this nation were compromised and changed. These terrorist attacks also dramatically impacted community preparedness programs nationwide. And this sequence of events forced us to recognize and address limitations within our first responder and emergency preparedness programs.

Two weeks ago Alabama, Louisiana, and Mississippi marked the second anniversary of Hurricane Katrina. The impact of this category five hurricane on Gulf Coast communities in these three states raised questions nationwide regarding our collective ability to respond to and recover from catastrophic disasters.

Mr. Chairman, these two seemingly unrelated events have in common a devastating impact on communities, residents and first responders. And these two events have dramatically changed emergency preparedness policies and programs at the federal, state, county and community level. In many cases, these changes are on-going.

By state government standards, PEMA is a small agency with approximately 160 personnel. Our overall mission includes developing and administering the commonwealth's comprehensive, all-hazards emergency preparedness and response program. In order to accomplish this goal, we develop essential partnerships with multiple state and federal agencies, county and community emergency managers, first responders, elected officials, critical infrastructure providers, and a host of other public and private sector partners who play a vital role in our on-going efforts to ensure public

health and safety in our communities. PEMA also employs and deploys the best available technologies in support of this critical mission.

For many years, Pennsylvania's emergency management agency and programs have been held in high national regard. We were one of the first emergency management agencies in the nation to integrate first the computer and then satellite technology into our disaster preparedness, tracking and management protocols. PEMA is also one of the few states in the nation to receive national certification, which was the result of peer review reflected against very demanding standards.

While we are technologically and in some cases programmatically advanced over many other state emergency management agencies, the true key to our success rests with our state and federal partners, the 67 county emergency managers, 2,500 plus municipal managers and more than 100,000 first responders across the state. Our role is to plan, coordinate and manage the Commonwealth's emergency preparedness program. Its effectiveness is based in great measure on the dedication and skill of our partners.

It is essential to understand that all disasters occur at the local level. The same holds true for initial disaster response. That is why Pennsylvania aggressively maintains a comprehensive training and exercise program for all 67 county emergency managers

While most of our communities face a multitude of potential hazards, flooding is the number one disaster potential in Pennsylvania. Permit me take a moment to recap the events of the past three years. Since 2004, the governor proclaimed 10 disaster emergencies and six major floods were designated by the president to receive federal disaster assistance. In all 65 of our 67 counties were included in these federal declarations, several more than once. More than 60,000 families and businesses were affected and approximately 2,000 communities lost essential public infrastructure or services. The overall estimate of impact exceeds \$400 million.

It is important to note that PEMA with our county and community partners are directly involved in supporting and initiating response to disasters and their impact on Pennsylvanians. Last June for example flooding in the northeast triggered more than 1,300 rescues, many by the National Guard and State Police with support from U. S. Coast Guard helicopters.

Once the initial response phase passes, PEMA turns its attention to the recovery phase of the disaster. If the President issues a declaration of major disaster, PEMA and the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) establish a Joint Field Office to facilitate the recovery. The primary purpose of the Joint Field Office is to help Pennsylvania residents, living in a disaster-designated county, who suffered damage to get assistance from FEMA and other federal agencies.

The Commonwealth of Pennsylvania with our federal and local government partners and first responders are also hard at work developing capabilities to address man-made events. The Regional Counter-Terrorism Task Force model was launched in 1998 due to

the growing threat of the use of Weapons of Mass Destruction. There are nine Regional Counter-Terrorism Task Forces comprised of all 67 counties in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. Each task force meets regularly to discuss plans and procedures for all-hazards preparedness. The member counties appoint a task force leader and determine who will hold positions in various task force committees. The emphasis for the task force model has been predicated on a “bottoms up” approach with ownership built-in to foster success.

The task forces have several planning assumptions that guide their thinking. These assumptions include: at the start of an event, local resources will be overwhelmed; emergency responsibility lies at the municipal level; significant state response will take at least four hours and significant federal response will take at least eight hours. These planning assumptions require that local and county officials be the initial responders in an incident, while the state through PEMA will provide response resources if requested.

In order to accomplish this task, under the umbrella of the Regional Task Forces, we are creating partnerships that include all aspects of our communities. Elected officials, first responders, business and industry, hospitals and the medical community, education, critical infrastructure, the volunteer community, the news media, and many others are working together to ensure the safety of our neighborhoods.

Mr. Chairman, PEMA maintain 24/7 communications with the counties through their 9-1-1 centers and county emergency management offices. On average about 5,000 incidents are reported to the state’s Emergency Operations Center (EOC) every year through the Pennsylvania Emergency Incident Reporting System (PEIRS). PEIRS is a Web-based, software application that provides tools for reporting and managing critical events that affect a variety of agencies and organizations.

We are working closely with the Governor’s Homeland Security Advisor, the Pennsylvania State Police, the Department of Health, National Guard, Department of Environmental Protection and Agriculture as well as and other state agencies involved in homeland security planning and preparedness in order to ensure a coordinated effort at the state, county and community level. Collectively we regularly meet with the Regional Task Forces as we proceed with the implementation of Pennsylvania’s statewide strategy. The Task Force program was formalized into state law in 2002 and serves as the foundation for the Commonwealth’s Counter-Terrorism Preparedness Program.

There are many elements that go into protecting the commonwealth from man-made emergencies. One of the primary keys to keeping the state safe is communication. There must be open lines of communication on all levels of government. The counties must make the state aware of problems and issues they face regarding the goal of protecting the commonwealth. In turn, PEMA and OHS along with other state agencies like the Pennsylvania State Police, Departments of Health, Environmental Protection, Transportation, Military and Veteran’s Affairs, Education and Agriculture have a responsibility to offer support to counties so they can more effectively prepare for a potential attack. That support includes assisting county emergency managers to develop

plans to minimize threats to our security. Another form of support comes in the commonwealth's ability to secure federal funding for homeland security initiatives on the state, county and local level. Since 1999, we have invested more than \$400 million in federal funds to help our Regional Task Forces acquire equipment, prepare plans and conduct training and exercises for and with community first responders. PEMA serves as the State Administrative Agency and manages this important program on behalf of the Task Forces and first responders,

While we are making significant progress in helping prepare our communities for response to terrorist events, it is important to remember that we are creating a statewide all-hazards preparedness platform that has application for a wide range of natural and man-made threats.

The true all-hazards value of the Regional Counter-terrorism Task Forces and their Weapons of Mass Destruction equipment cache was demonstrated at 5:28 a.m. on January 31, 2005 when 13 cars of a Norfolk Southern Railroad train derailed along the Allegheny River in the Creighton section of East Deer, Allegheny County. Four of the cars fell into the river. Two of the tanker cars that ended up in the river were filled with anhydrous hydrogen fluoride, a caustic concentrated gas that turns into hydrofluoric acid when mixed with water. Hydrogen fluoride can cause burns to the skin and eyes and may be fatal if inhaled or absorbed through the skin. Responders were fortunate that the cars were under water that prevented the gas from impacting responders and residents down wind. Local officials said that the death toll could have been significant had the gas escaped. For the first time, all responders at the site were wearing appropriate protective gear to help protect them. In many cases this equipment was purchased by PEMA and shipped to Region 13, the RCTTF in Pittsburgh. The source of the funding was federal terrorism preparedness funding.

A number of the elements key to our success are already in place. Effective communications is one of the greatest challenges to our community emergency response program. Major incidents involve multiple response organizations from many areas. Many use different radio systems on a range of varied frequencies, which makes communications and coordination almost impossible. PEMA is working with our 800 MHz radio project staff to develop interoperable communications capabilities, which will allow incident commanders at the scene of a disaster to communicate effectively with all responders. We installed 800 MHz radios in every county 9-1-1 center and are actively engaged in developing methodology to allow inter-operable communications within each county among all first responders.

Working with our federal, county and community partners, we are moving to the next level in the areas of technology applications, data management and information dissemination. Given the challenges we face as a nation, it is imperative that we continue to harness the resources of modern technology as an important tool within our overall preparedness program.

An example of this type of initiative is the dramatic transformation of our statewide satellite-based Emergency Alert System, which began four years ago. With the support of radio and television stations and cable system operators across the state, emergency management officials can alert residents to approaching severe weather conditions or accidents that present threats to community safety. The most common EAS alerts involve flood and tornado warnings. Rail and highway accidents involving dangerous materials as well as accidents in the work place can impact neighborhoods. The EAS program provides elected officials and emergency managers the capability to provide reliable, rapid, widespread public warning.

Directly related to this vital program is Project Amber which allows the State Police to alert area residents when a child has been abducted. With the cooperation and support of the broadcast community, PEMA is converting this statewide network from a less than reliable off-air monitoring system to a state-of-the-art computer controlled interactive digital network.

And finally, we are very aware of the limited funding and need to do more with less. It is our goal to maximize the application of the funding we receive, both from the state and federal government. I am confident that by working closely with our partners at the federal, state, county and community level, we can support our first responders and protect our communities against the unknown.

At the end of the day Mr. Chairman, after a lot of hard work and careful investment in this comprehensive regional program, which includes necessary equipment, planning, training and exercises, Pennsylvania's communities are safer and more secure. With your support, we will continue to make things ever better.

It has been a pleasure addressing you today and I would be happy to respond to questions.