

Ranking Member Brian Higgins (D-NY) Opening Statement

“WMD Terrorism: Assessing the Continued Homeland Threat”

Subcommittee on Counterterrorism and Intelligence Committee on Homeland Security

November 15, 2012

We have been fortunate that a WMD attack has never come to fruition in the United States. The threat from weapons of mass destruction is not limited to any particular organization or nation. Consequently, we have to be prepared for an adequate response to an attack on all fronts.

In 2008, the Commission on the Prevention of WMD Proliferation and Terrorism—“the WMD Commission”—produced a report entitled “World at Risk”. According to that report, the Commission told us that they believed that a terrorist attack would occur somewhere in the world by 2013, and that it was more than likely to be an act of biological terrorism.

The Commission found that America needs to move more aggressively to address our vulnerability to a bioterror attack. And it concluded that the best strategy for biodefense was improving the ability to respond.

A potential WMD attack requires that we alter policy and ensure that first responders have the resources that are necessary to be effective.

Investments in emergency communications, planning, and response equipment save lives. The first responder grant programs important to WMD preparedness should not be understated and must be provided at adequate levels.

Mr. Chairman, as you know, I represent the Western New York. The first responders of Western New York have repeatedly answered the call. They faced the man made horrors of Ground Zero and are currently facing the wrath of Mother Nature with assistance with Hurricane Sandy.

To know that the actions of first responders will be critical to preventing a catastrophe in the wake of a potential WMD attack, we should give the Department of Homeland Security incentive to properly fund them.

In July, representatives of first responders in Western New York, testified before this Subcommittee. Their testimony indicated that funding for response is crucial to their efforts. I believe the WMD Commission and the testimony our witnesses will provide today will underscore that point.

Earlier this Congress, this Committee voted favorably to report H.R. 2356, the WMD Prevention and Preparedness Act of 2012 to the House. This comprehensive legislation addressed the major actions recommended by the WMD Commission and included a range of provisions related to prevention, deterrence, detection, preparedness, response and recovery.

Along with readiness, information sharing among federal, state, and local agencies must be strong when it comes to WMD intelligence. This Congress, the Chairman of this Subcommittee introduced legislation that strengthens WMD intelligence and information sharing. This legislation, too, was voted favorably by this Committee.

Although these two bills are steps in the right direction, there is still more work that needs to be done. First responders need to be fully capable and equipped to handle a WMD attack - this means full funding of state and local grant programs by the federal government.

Additionally, coordination needs to be improved among federal, state, local, and private entities to have a WMD response that is expedient and efficient. I look forward to the witness testimony today and to hearing how we can work more to close the gaps that exist and provide resources needed to ensure we are resilient.