

Testimony of

The Honorable Jim Turner

September 3, 2003

Statement for the Record of Congressman Jim Turner
Before the
Senate Judiciary Committee, Subcommittee on Technology, Terrorism and Homeland Security
Hearing: "Terrorism: First Responders"
September 3, 2003

Thank you Mr. Chairman and Senator Feinstein:

As you convene this hearing today, it is likely that a terrorist group somewhere in the world is developing plans to attack the United States.

Let me say at the outset, that our first responsibility at every level of government is to prevent the terrorists from fulfilling their plans. Whether through military action, intelligence operations, border, port, and aviation security, and critical infrastructure protection, our duty is to take every practicable action in our power to provide a common defense for this nation.

The focus of today's hearing is whether we are prepared in the event that the terrorists overcome our best efforts and America is attacked again.

The first reports from the frontlines in the war on terror are not encouraging. Many Members of the Select Homeland Security Committee--including myself--have talked with state and local officials across this nation; the men and women who are responsible for our public safety; the individuals who make key decisions on how to prepare our communities. In many instances, they have yet to hear from the Department of Homeland Security about the coordination of Federal, state, and local response assets. They are not receiving the threat and intelligence information they need to make critical security decisions within their communities. They cannot obtain answers to their basic questions about the numerous federal grant programs for terrorism preparedness. They have yet to be involved in the development of an integrated terrorism response strategy, one that is "efficient and effective," as mandated by the President.

I have also talked with people from New York City to my hometown of Crockett, Texas. They are asking, "What does the Homeland Security Advisory System, with its color codes, really mean to me? What actions should I take - or should I avoid - if our national threat level rises in response to new intelligence or law enforcement information?"

After talking with state and local officials, first responders and citizens across the nation, about improving our capabilities to prepare for and respond to the threat of terrorism, one message comes through loud and clear--we must move faster and be stronger in our efforts. Faster in our efforts to bring together Federal, State, and local officials to meet the founding mandate of the

Department of Homeland Security to "ensure that all levels of government across the Nation have the capability to work efficiently and effectively together." Stronger in our efforts to train, exercise, and equip the men and women on the frontlines: firefighters, police, emergency management, and healthcare workers. And more vigorous in our efforts to prepare individuals, families, and communities to face the multitude of threats from those that seek to do us harm.

Numerous independent research organizations have clearly identified the shortfalls in our preparedness efforts. In particular, on June 29, the Council on Foreign Relations' Independent Task Force on Emergency Responders released a report entitled, "Emergency Responders: Drastically Underfunded, Dangerously Unprepared." The report states that nearly two years after 9/11, the United States is drastically under funding local emergency responders, and remains dangerously unprepared to handle a catastrophic attack on American soil.

According to data provided to the Task Force by emergency responder professional associations and leading emergency response officials from around the country, America may fall approximately \$98.4 billion short of meeting critical emergency responder needs over the next five years if current funding levels are maintained.

Beyond any specific estimate of resource shortfalls, however, the Report makes clear, that two major obstacles hamper America's emergency preparedness efforts. First, it is impossible to know precisely what is needed and how much it will cost because we lack a common understanding of the essential capabilities each community needs to respond to a catastrophic terrorist attack. Second, funding for emergency responders has been sidetracked and stalled due to the slow distribution of funds by federal agencies, and bureaucratic red tape at all levels of government.

The work of this expert, bi-partisan Task Force makes clear to all that we must move faster and stronger to prepare our communities and protect America. We rightly made a commitment to provide the best training and equipment to our troops in Afghanistan and Iraq. Now we must make the same level of commitment to the men and women who will be the first to respond in case of a terrorist attack here in America.

Both the Task Force Report and my on-going discussions with emergency responders throughout the Nation indicate that the time for comprehensive change to our preparedness programs is now. I am encouraged by the proposed changes announced yesterday by Secretary Ridge to centralize the administration of existing terrorism grant programs within a single office. I believe the consolidation is a constructive step, so long as traditional anti-crime and fire prevention proposals are administered separately. However, by itself, it will not result in action to correct four critical deficiencies that must be addressed immediately:

First, we do not know what we truly need. The Department of Homeland Security has not worked with state and local governments to determine the minimum essential capabilities that all of our communities need to be prepared for terrorist attacks. No process has been put in place to define what emergency responders in every jurisdiction for a given population size should possess or have access to. Because we do not know what equipment, planning, training and personnel are truly needed, we do not know the true cost of preparedness.

Therefore, there is an urgent need to establish an expert Task Force--made up of Federal, State and local officials--to determine minimum essential capabilities for our first responder community and provide clear guidance to them on the necessary skills and resources required to prevent, prepare for, and respond to terrorist attacks. Such essential capabilities would be based, in part, on the threats and vulnerabilities facing our communities, taking into account such factors as population density and the presence of critical infrastructure. Communities would then apply this guidance to determine their specific needs. Having identified their specific needs, communities could then create preparedness and response plans based on local, regional, state, and federal capabilities. The plans would determine definitive funding requirements at the State, regional, and local levels.

Second, the first responder grant system is broken. The current grants do not target the greatest needs, take too long to reach first responders, pit agencies against each other in applying for funds, and are overly bureaucratic.

The Department should create a new terrorism preparedness grant program, based on the State and local assessments I described earlier, in order to address communities' lack of essential capabilities. The new grant program will be focused on supplying our first responders with the essential capabilities they require to be prepared. This grant program, along with all other of the Department's terrorism preparedness grant programs, should be streamlined within one office to improve efficiency and effectiveness. Traditional all-hazards programs such as COPS and FIRE grants should be preserved. In addition, the Department should more quickly develop equipment and training standards to ensure the effective use of grant funding.

Third, our response personnel cannot talk to each other. The attacks of September 11 underscored a problem known only too well within our first responder community: it is often difficult for our police, firefighters, and emergency medical workers to talk quickly and effectively with each other during an emergency because their communications equipment is not properly interoperable. The Department of Homeland Security, however, has not moved quickly enough to address this troublesome communications problem.

The Department must, therefore, develop and issue a strategy to achieve communications interoperability by working with our first responders community and industry to provide standards for communication equipment, systems, and procedures. The Department should work with the Federal Communications Commission to provide adequate radio spectrum for emergency personnel. Additionally, sufficient funding should be made available to allow the Department to provide currently available, interoperable communications technologies for major population centers in metropolitan areas throughout the Nation.

Finally, desperately needed threat information is not readily available. As witnesses before the Select Committee on Homeland Security have stated, the Department is not providing first responders with timely, actionable intelligence and threat information. In addition, the functions of the Homeland Security Advisory System are not well understood, and changes to the nationwide threat level are costing our cities and States hundreds of millions of dollars.

The Department must improve the threat warning system and implement new ways to provide continuous, real-time, actionable information to state and local officials and the general public.

Secretary Ridge's announcement yesterday regarding the Department's efforts to improve information sharing with state and local officials is a step in the right direction, but more needs to be done. First responders and the public need to know whether and how to respond to changes to the threat level, and funding should be provided to States and local governments for associated enhanced security activities.

The four critical deficiencies that I have just outlined - as well as the solutions to those deficiencies - must be addressed immediately. Therefore, I intend to introduce comprehensive legislation shortly to rectify each of these identified problems. My legislation will be designed to achieve the following outcomes:

- ? We will clearly identify the preparedness needs for our communities and create plans to meet those needs;

- ? We will maximize the effectiveness of every tax dollar spent on emergency preparedness measures because we will know we will be able - for the first time - to spend the right amount on the right priorities; and

- ? We will strengthen the Federal, State, and local partnership in the fight against terrorism by improving our communications capabilities, and our national threat warning system.

The Council on Foreign Relations' Task Force Report and the continued call for systemic funding changes from State and local emergency responders are a wake up call to the nation. They show that America's security needs are great, they are not being met, and that we must act now.

America's enemies are united in their desire to harm America. We must be united in moving faster and deploying stronger forces to win the war on terror.

When our nation has been under its greatest time of trial, this Congress and this government have worked with speed and strength of purpose. In his first 100 days, Franklin Roosevelt and the Congress worked together to build the plan that saved a nation from economic devastation. It has 24 months since September 11th, and well over 100 days since the founding of the Department of Homeland Security. We must move faster and we must be stronger in our efforts to protect and defend the United States of America.

I thank the Subcommittee for the opportunity to testify, and I look forward to working with you in the coming days to address the needs of our first responder community.