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Statement of Rep. Christopher Shays April 27, 2004

Today we continue our oversight of physical security at the nation's nuclear weapons facilities. Last June, we learned the Department of Energy (DoE) was not aggressively confronting the many challenges posed by the need to secure a sprawling, aging infrastructure against post-September 11th threats. So we asked the General Accounting Office (GAO) to evaluate the development and implementation of the new nuclear security standard – called the “Design Basis Threat” or DBT.

The GAO report, released today, finds some progress but concludes the new DBT may not yet be as realistic, rigorous or real-time as needed to protect nuclear materials from determined terrorists. Without question, DoE nuclear warhead production plants, test facilities, research labs, storage locations and decommissioned sites are attractive targets for terrorists determined to turn our technology against us, and willing to die while doing so. The highly enriched uranium and plutonium held at various locations could be used as the core of an improvised nuclear device or dispersed as a radiological weapon.

Yet it took almost two years - an inexplicably and inexcusably long time - to update the DBT after September 11th.

Faced with the new security imperative to deny access, not just contain or catch intruders, it should have been immediately obvious DOE has too many facilities housing nuclear materials. And those facilities are old, above ground, scattered around cluttered World War II era plant configurations and not buffered by adequate setback space.

It may not be enough just to harden existing sites with more gates, guns and guards. Consolidation of nuclear material storage, long advocated but little pursued at DoE, would improve security by reducing the number of sites and the cost of protecting them. New security technologies will have to be evaluated and deployed to meet emerging threats.

But as we will hear in testimony today, a serious question remains whether the DBT adequately reflects the true nature of the threat. Some believe the Design Basis Threat might be more accurately called the “Dollar Based Threat” reflecting only a watered down measure of how much security the Department can afford. And, GAO doubts DOE will be able to fully implement even that standard before 2009. We know the terrorists will not wait that long to try to exploit lingering vulnerabilities in our nuclear complex defenses.

Last month, DOE announced a plan to move some nuclear material from Technical Area 18 at the Los Alamos National Laboratory to a more secure facility in Nevada. Implementation of that plan will demonstrate a sharper focus and renewed sense of urgency at DOE and the National Nuclear Security Administration (NNSA). But we need to be sure that consolidation is just the most visible part of a broad, strategic effort to implement a realistic DBT.

Charged by law to sustain the nation’s nuclear deterrent capabilities, DOE and NNSA have the unenviable task of balancing the demands of that mission against the risks and costs of meeting security threats in a new and dangerous era. Our oversight seeks to ensure that balance is struck as openly and as effectively as possible so that nuclear security, homeland security and national security will be enhanced.

Those are goals shared by all our witnesses, and we are grateful for their participation in this hearing. Welcome. We look forward to your testimony.