

SUBCOMMITTEE ON NATIONAL SECURITY, EMERGING THREATS,
AND INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

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Statement of Rep. Christopher Shays September 9, 2003

Well before September 11, 2001, this Subcommittee heard testimony from first responders and other experts expressing frustration over the extent and pace of federal counterterrorism equipment and training programs. They told us fragmentation and duplication hobbled a multi-agency, multi-billion dollar preparedness effort that failed to answer the fundamental question, "Prepared for what?"

Since the 9/11 attacks, much has been done, and much more has been spent, to consolidate and focus federal support for first responders. But a growing body of analysis and commentary suggests increased activity still may not be producing enough measurable progress toward the elusive goal of actual preparedness.

One recent report of an Independent Task Force sponsored by the Council of Foreign Relations (CFR) concluded the nation's emergency responders remain "dangerously ill-prepared to handle a catastrophic attack on American soil." While acknowledging some improvement in counterterrorism capabilities, the CFR report says federal funding for first responders may fall 98 billion dollars short of meeting basic needs for training and equipment over the next five years.

Just as ominously, the report says any effort to quantify the cost of preparedness will be confounded by the lack of agreed-upon measures for success: “Without establishing minimal preparedness levels and equipment and performance standards that the federal government and state and local communities can strive to attain, the United States will have created an illusion of preparedness based on boutique funding initiatives without being systematically prepared.”

These are not abstract policy considerations. Without standards, time and money will be wasted on a dangerous and costly illusion, while police officers, firefighters, emergency medical teams, public health providers and emergency managers confront terrorism without the tools they need. Nor can we afford to wait for a national consensus on standards to emerge before funding critical first responder initiatives. The threat is now, the threat is real, and local emergency responders need to be prepared to meet it.

Next Monday, the City of Stamford, Connecticut will conduct a tabletop exercise of emergency response capabilities against a weapon of mass destruction scenario. Sponsored by the Department of Homeland Security, the simulation will help emergency responders there assess and improve readiness against terrorist attacks. To sharpen our focus on the needs of first responders, the Subcommittee will be there to observe the exercise and take testimony from participants on the scope and impact of federal efforts to enhance local preparedness.

This morning, we are joined by two distinguished expert panels of witnesses. We appreciate their time, talent and dedication and we are grateful for their continued contributions to our oversight work.