

Opening Statement of Chairman Doug Ose
The Homeland Security Department's Plan to Consolidate and Co-locate
Regional and Field Offices: Improving Communication and Coordination
March 24, 2004

In November 2002, Congress established the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) to ensure that the tragic events of September 11, 2001 would never happen again. Transferring 22 former Federal agencies and approximately 180,000 employees to DHS is a relatively easy task. However, integrating the staff, missions, physical assets, and capabilities into a cohesive Federal department is an extremely difficult task. This effort is complicated by the fact that many of the 22 former Federal agencies had, and still have, multiple regional and field offices with overlapping jurisdictions.

Recognizing the obstacles that the former regional and field structures would impose upon communication and coordination among and between DHS staff and local first responders, I consulted with Subcommittee Ranking Member John Tierney before introducing Section 706 of the Department of Homeland Security Act. Section 706 required DHS to develop and submit to Congress by November 25, 2003, a plan to consolidate and co-locate the former Federal agency regional and field offices within the same municipality that were transferred to DHS.

DHS submitted its report to Congress on February 4, 2004. The report provides a minimal description of consolidation and co-location plans for the border and transportation security field offices. However, on a department-wide scale, DHS merely provided an outline of a general 5-7 year plan to consolidate and co-locate physical assets. DHS did not explain how or when it plans to reorganize the overlapping regional and field offices and their respective jurisdictions. Importantly, the report does not address the relationship between consolidation and co-location of physical assets and section 706's legislative history.

The legislative history provides that consolidation and co-location is not merely an exercise of assets management and government efficiency. As Congressman Tierney and I discussed in a colloquy on the House floor, the purpose of the section 706 report is for DHS to provide to Congress a plan explaining how it intends to use consolidation and co-location to improve the level of communication and cooperation among and between DHS and first responders.

DHS staff that is located within a single building are easier to cross-train to perform emergency and other functions needed in a homeland security or natural disaster emergency. It is also crucial that first responders know the identity of and have meaningful relationships with their counterparts in the local DHS regional and field offices. Moreover, a one-stop shop for local first responders can greatly improve local preparedness and response by providing improved communication, cross-training, and financial assistance.

Congress tasked DHS with arguably the toughest and most important job in the Federal government. Congress understands that melding 22 Federal agencies with unique histories, cultures and regional field structures and jurisdictions is a daunting task. However, DHS cannot fully defend our homeland security until its regional and field structures are optimally organized, staff is cross-trained, and the lines of communication between DHS field offices and local first responders are open.

I want to emphasize that today's hearing is not about funding to DHS or local first responders. Today's hearing is also not about which DHS regional or field offices might be closed. Chairman Shays and I called this hearing to facilitate and improve this Nation's state of readiness. Today we will hear from DHS on its efforts not only to consolidate and co-locate DHS's human and physical assets but also to do so strategically. We are joined on the second panel by some of the key players in the local first responder community. We welcome all of you and thank you for your tireless efforts.

The witnesses for today's hearing are: Asa Hutchinson, Under Secretary for Border and Transportation Security, DHS; C. Morgan Kinghorn, President, National Academy of Public Administration; Edward A. Flynn, Secretary, Executive Office of Public Safety, State of Massachusetts, on behalf of the National Governors Association; Karen Anderson, Mayor, City of Minnetonka, Minnesota, on behalf of the National League of Cities; Dr. Martin Fenstersheib, Health Officer for the Santa Clara County Public Health Department, San Jose, California, on behalf of the National Association of County and City Health Officers; and, James Lee Witt, President, James Lee Witt Associates, LLP and former Director of the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA).