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United States Senate

COMMITTEE ON
HOMELAND SECURITY AND GOVERNMENTAL AFFAIRS
WASHINGTON, DC 20510-6250

April 24, 2007

The Honorable Michael Chertoff
Secretary
Department of Homeland Security
3801 Nebraska Avenue, N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20528

Dear Secretary Chertoff:

We are seriously concerned about the Department of Homeland Security's efforts to improve communications interoperability for our first responders. A recent Government Accountability Office (GAO) report titled, "Much Work Remains to Improve Communications Interoperability," found major weaknesses in the Department's program to improve first responder interoperable communications capabilities. It is critical that these weaknesses be addressed so that all first responders can communicate with one another before the next major disaster.

Some of the deficiencies GAO has identified in the Department's interoperability program have been addressed by Congress in the Post-Katrina Emergency Management Reform Act, P.L. 109-295. The Reform Act established a new Office of Emergency Communications (OEC) within the Department to provide greater coordination and leadership on interoperability issues and directed OEC to develop a National Emergency Communications Plan to achieve interoperability. We believe that the Reform Act, if properly implemented, will go a long way in addressing the poor planning and insufficient performance measures identified by GAO. The GAO report raises a number of other specific issues, though, that will be critical for the Department to address.

The GAO found that the Department does not have a process for ensuring that state and local government interoperable communications grant requests are consistent with statewide interoperable communications plans. According to GAO, grant reviewers at the state level have inadequate tools to determine if local funding requests for equipment are compatible with statewide interoperable communications goals. As a result, local interoperability grants have tended to focus on addressing short-term solutions, rather than long-term, statewide interoperability solutions. We note that these very concerns led us to include provisions in S. 4, the Improving America's Security Act of 2007, which passed the Senate on March 13, 2007, to ensure that the Department, when awarding grants under the new interoperability grant program, will assess how

states' grant requests support their statewide communication plans – a key recommendation of GAO. As GAO notes, though, until the Department takes a more strategic approach, progress in achieving interoperability is likely to be impeded. What is the Department doing to ensure that interoperable communications grants are used to pursue long-term solutions that will establish interoperability across states and regions?

Section 7303 of the Intelligence Reform and Terrorism Prevention Act of 2004, of which we were co-authors, required the Department to pursue development of interoperable communications capabilities for state and local first responders as well as federal public safety agencies. The GAO, however, found that the objectives of the Department's interoperability program, SAFECOM, did not include the resolution of issues needed to improve interoperability between federal agencies and state and local agencies. When destruction of the magnitude wrought by Hurricane Katrina occurs, state and local first responders must have the ability to communicate with the federal agencies responding to the disaster. What is the Department doing to ensure that the SAFECOM program improves the ability of state and local agencies to communicate with federal agencies?

The Department's SAFECOM program has taken the lead in developing interoperability standards for radio communications systems. Although some radio interface standards have been agreed upon by industry vendors and public safety equipment users, the GAO found that several of the critical interface standards are incomplete or not well defined. GAO found that ambiguities in the published standards have led to incompatibilities among products made by different vendors, and no compliance testing has been conducted to determine if these products are interoperable. As a result, radios that supposedly meet these standards – which are sometimes more expensive than radios that do not – may not allow first responders to talk to one another. What is the Department doing to accelerate the development of interoperable radio equipment standards and what plans does the Department have for testing vendor products sold under the Project 25 standards?

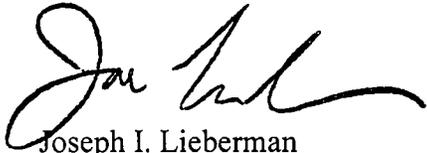
The GAO report also concluded that a lack of training hampers progress towards achieving interoperability. GAO found that the Department scaled back exercises under Urban Area Security Initiative (UASI) grants that would have validated the effectiveness of the tactical interoperable communications plans in UASI areas. Without robust exercises, GAO found, these areas can have only limited confidence in their plans' effectiveness. What plans does the Department have for conducting full-scale, robust exercises of interoperability communications plans?

Finally, we request that you provide the Committee a full explanation of your disagreement with GAO's recommendation that the Department modify its grant guidance to provide more flexibility in purchasing communications equipment until standards for completed interfaces have been fully defined. While we understand that the Department does not want to undermine negotiations on standards, we also want to make sure that grants are available to pursue short- and long-term solutions through current and

next generation interoperability solutions, such as gateways and backbone technologies that connect existing radio systems, including Internet Protocol solutions.

If you have any questions, please contact Troy Cribb on the majority staff of the Senate Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee at 202-224-2627 or Rob Strayer on the minority staff at 202-224-4751. Thank you for your attention to this important issue.

Sincerely,



Joseph I. Lieberman
Chairman



Susan M. Collins
Ranking Member