

Nomination of Alexander Gerard Garza
To be Assistant Secretary and Chief Medical Officer,
Department of Homeland Security
Chairman Joe Lieberman
July 28, 2009

Good morning. This hearing will now come to order. This morning, the Committee will consider the nomination of Dr. Alexander Gerard Garza to be Assistant Secretary and Chief Medical Officer at the Department of Homeland Security.

This position was created by the Post-Katrina Emergency Management Reform Act of 2006, that was authored, I'm proud to say, by Senator Collins and myself, following this committee's eight-month investigation into why the response of our government to Hurricane Katrina was so poor.

The Post-Katrina Reform Act re-configured FEMA so that it could – for the first time in history – respond really in an excellent way to natural disasters and also beyond that to catastrophic disasters equivalent to the swamping of New Orleans in 2005. Among the new positions it created to achieve end, which was the better protection of the American people in crisis, was the position of Chief Medical Officer, to be the chief and principal advisor to the Secretary of Homeland Security and to the Director of FEMA on both medical and public health issues.

Among the responsibilities of the Chief Medical Officer is coordinating the Department's response to not just natural disasters, but to terrorism, including particularly the threat of bioterrorism, which is a special focus of this Committee in this session, ensuring coordination of all medical preparedness and response activities of the Department, and coordinating the Department's workforce health protection. In short, the Chief Medical Officer is responsible for ensuring that the federal government is ready to carry out a quick, comprehensive and effective medical response to disasters, both natural and unnatural.

I would say it is especially important, and I know the Secretary feels the same way, that this position be filled right away. As chief medical advisor, Dr. Garza, should you be confirmed, you will play a vital role in our nation's response to the H1N1 outbreak, which is continuing. Though many Americans and a lot of the news media have turned to other matters, this epidemic has continued to spread. Cases now number over one million in this country and the flu has not subsided as expected this summer. It has not surged up in numbers, but it has continued at pretty much the same pace, which is not what most public health officials predicted. It continues to be most problematic for children and young adults, and unfortunately there is every indication that it will spread rapidly in the fall, when the traditional flu season returns. Obviously it is imperative that we be

ready for that and that we get ready for that and I'm going to ask you about that during the Q and A.

I want to express in closing here my admiration and gratitude for your experience and your service to your country and how much I look forward to hearing your opening statement and then questioning you as you go forward on this nomination.

Senator Collins?