

STATEMENT OF CHAIRMAN DANIEL K. AKAKA

From Earthquakes to Terrorist Attacks: Is the National Capital Region Prepared for the Next Disaster?

**Joint Hearing
Subcommittee on Oversight of Government Management,
the Federal Workforce, and the District of Columbia,
&
Ad Hoc Subcommittee on Disaster Recovery and Intergovernmental Affairs
Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs**

Today, we will examine the National Capital Region's (NCR) preparedness and response to natural and man-made disasters. The NCR is a region defined by statute including the District of Columbia, Maryland, Virginia, 11 local jurisdictions, three branches of federal government, and over five million residents. More than 20 million tourists visit the NCR every year and 340,000 federal employees work in the area.

This is an appropriate time to explore the NCR's emergency preparedness and response capabilities, as we commemorate the 70th anniversary of the surprise attacks on Pearl Harbor, and we recently marked the 10th anniversary of the September 11, 2001, attacks. Both tragic events tested our Nation's preparedness, and 9/11 exposed shortfalls in this region's readiness.

The Oversight of Government Management, the Federal Workforce, and the District of Columbia Subcommittee's oversight of NCR preparedness has spanned several Congresses. The Subcommittee held a series of hearings on this issue in 2005, 2006, and 2007, focusing largely on the region's poor strategic planning. This hearing will help us evaluate the NCR's latest strategic planning activities.

The responses to recent emergencies, including the January 26, 2011, snowstorm that led to many hours of gridlock and the East Coast Earthquake in August, have renewed concerns that the NCR still faces serious challenges in disaster preparedness and response ten years after 9/11.

I was particularly troubled that the public, including federal employees, received very little guidance in the immediate aftermath of the earthquake. I look forward to discussing how we can improve regional situational awareness and information sharing. NCR members must be able to communicate with each other, make informed decisions, and provide clear, consistent information to the public. Additionally, it is important for family members to be able to connect in the crucial hours after an unexpected event.

Coordinating so many jurisdictions is challenging. However, it is essential that the region operates as a cohesive and unified body during emergencies. A *Washington Post* editorial argued for creating a regional structure with the authority to direct incident response. NCR officials have recommended improvements within the existing framework.

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Recently, Senator Pryor and I requested that GAO review whether the NCR's current system for preparedness and response is effective and efficient. I look forward to discussing how the NCR can be best prepared to protect the millions of people who live and work in the NCR, and to preserve the many national treasures located here.

I commend the Office of Personnel Management for revising its dismissal and closure guidance in response to the January 2011 snowstorm, and working with partner agencies and the Council of Governments to get their input. These changes should help avoid future widespread gridlock, improve safety for federal employees and others, and enhance continuity of government operations. I also commend the Council of Governments for its review of the snowstorm and practical recommendations to improve coordination and information sharing.

While today's hearing focuses on the Washington, D.C. area, the issues of preparedness and response are important for regional coordination in cities and states across the country. I would like to thank the members of the NCR for all of their hard work to keep us safe from harm.

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