

Senate Subcommittee on Oversight of Government Management, the Federal Workforce, and the District of Columbia and the Ad Hoc Subcommittee on Disaster Recovery and Intergovernmental Affairs joint hearing:

December 7, 2011

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

Opening Statement

I would like to start today by recognizing that today’s hearing coincides with the 70th anniversary of the surprise attack on Pearl Harbor, and reflect on that fateful day and the heroism that still inspires us today. Pearl Harbor was a no-notice event that shocked us and altered the course of this Nation — like 9/11 just over ten years ago.

Recent events like August’s earthquake and the January 2011 snowstorm reminded us once again that the security of the Washington D.C. region is a test case for the entire Nation. Unfortunately, the hours of traffic gridlock and communications failures in the aftermath of these events exposed leadership gaps and bureaucratic fragmentation in the region’s response efforts.

Without knowing who is responsible in an emergency, we are forced to question whether we are truly prepared to maintain continuity of government. We also wonder whether we can protect our critical infrastructure and ensure the safety of the five million people who live in the region.

The emergency responders who work tirelessly to keep the Capitol safe from harm deserve our recognition for their service. The size of the metropolitan area, the multiple State and local governments, and broad scope of threats, make for a unique and complex coordination challenge.

But the risk of not being prepared is too great—as the seat of the Federal government and the center of command-and-control for our Nation’s military and diplomatic missions, we need to be especially ready to respond to any threats that come our way.

At the same time and in light of current economic realities, we must be vigilant about streamlining operations. We need to strengthen efficiencies in the region's partnerships and response entities. We need to assess the roles of the region's responders, identify critical gaps. And we need to ensure that there are no costly redundancies or inefficiencies in the current preparedness system. These steps are necessary if we are truly committed to improving the effectiveness of the region's first responders and ensuring we are spending taxpayer dollars responsibly.

Today we will be talking about improving coordination in the National Capital Region's emergency preparedness. Although the National Capital Region is unique in many ways, improving coordination and effectiveness in emergency operations is a challenge that exists in major metropolitan areas across the country.

For example, the city of Memphis is crucial to eastern Arkansas and northwest Mississippi as a regional center for transportation, media and health care services. A major event in Memphis would have a far-reaching impact on the area and its preparedness depends on collaboration between the numerous State and local governments and first responder agencies. I hope that today's assessment of preparedness and protection capabilities in the National Capital Region will yield efficiencies that can be applied in other multi-jurisdictional metropolitan areas.

In October our two subcommittees collaborated on a Government Accountability Office (GAO) request asking for further examination of the National Capital Region's current system of all-hazards preparation. Today's hearing will serve as a jumping-off point for GAO. It will also help us determine what we can do in Congress to ensure that our nation's cities are equipped to respond effectively to emergencies.