



Senate Testimony

Hartford Public Schools/City of Hartford Cyberattack

Dr. Leslie Torres-Rodriguez, Superintendent Hartford Public Schools

December 2, 2020

Good Afternoon Senator Hassan and Senators of the Committee,

I am Dr. Leslie Torres-Rodriguez, the proud Superintendent of Hartford Public Schools. Hartford Public Schools is the third-largest school district in Connecticut with approximately 18,000 students. I appreciate your invitation to address the committee and answer questions regarding the cyberattack on Hartford Public Schools and the City of Hartford that occurred in September.

The cyberattack had extremely disruptive effects on our school system, students, and staff. We were forced to postpone our first day of school on September 8, following months of intense planning for in-person learning amidst the COVID-19 pandemic. While our beautiful and capable students have been attending school either in-person or online for nearly three months now, we are still repairing and recovering from the lingering effects of the attack.

Hartford Public Schools and the City of Hartford were informed by our shared IT department, Metro Hartford Information Services, that in the early morning hours on Saturday, September 5, we experienced a severe cyberattack. Specifically, a ransomware attack, which aims to take control of targeted servers and sell access back to the owner. The attack was unsuccessful overall because Metro Hartford Information Services regained control of its servers without complying with the attacker's demands, thanks to recent cybersecurity investments and quick work by the MHIS team. Based on initial analysis by the Connecticut National Guard and the Federal Bureau of Investigation, the attack was likely conducted by a highly sophisticated actor, and so in one sense we are fortunate that we avoided the worst-case scenario.

The HPS Team, Metro Hartford Information Services, and the Mayor's office worked late into the night on Labor Day and into the early hours on Tuesday, September 8 to ensure that Hartford Public Schools' critical systems were restored so that the first day of school could proceed. Our Student Information System was restored around midnight but as of 3 AM, our transportation system was still not accessible. Our transportation company and schools had no access to the student bus schedules. Around 4 AM, I made the difficult call to postpone our first day of school.

Fortunately, we were able to get our transportation system online by the evening of September 8 and we opened our schools for the first time since March on Wednesday, September 9. However, two



weeks later, our systems were still not yet fully operational and the costs to address this problem, financially and in resources and staff time, have been significant.

While we have regained control of our servers and data, preventative measures are ongoing and present significant challenges to getting back to normal operations. For example, all our servers needed to be taken offline and reimaged or restored from backups. The total amount of information that needed to be restored is over 70 terabytes across the City and school system, which is a massive amount of information.

Additionally, every computer that had connected to the district network before the attack – just before the start of the school year – had to be individually restored to factory settings before reconnecting with the network. This required a very fast deployment of new laptops to hundreds of staff members, which depleted our stock of laptops to provide to students at a critical time in the school year. While we had ordered new laptops with the intention of ensuring every student had a district device at the start of the school year, that plan was set back because of the cyberattack. This was an especially difficult consequence of this attack as many of our students are participating in online learning from home and need a reliable device to engage in their schoolwork. These preventative measures impeded our ability to operate normally, and for teachers to provide student instruction, impairing even basic functions like scanning and printing.

I am proud of the work done by our IT team, city officials, and district administration, and thankful for the investigative actions and support from the Connecticut National Guard and the FBI. However, we need to protect our critical infrastructure by preventing such attacks in the future.

Thank you again Senator Hassan for inviting me to testify today before this sub-committee on this important issue. While this attack was unexpected and damaging in many ways, I am grateful for the way our local, state, and federal agencies collaborated to address the cyberattack and assisted with the restoration efforts. We are all committed to serving our constituents in the best way possible

I would be happy to answer any questions you may have.

Dr. Leslie Torres-Rodriguez
Superintendent
Hartford Public Schools