

Opening Statement of Chairman Thomas R. Carper
“The Navy Yard Tragedy: Examining Physical Security for Federal Facilities”
December 17, 2013

As prepared for delivery:

Good morning and thank you for joining us today for this very important hearing that will take a closer look at physical security for federal facilities.

Three months ago, Aaron Alexis reported to the Washington Navy Yard with intentions to inflict pain and suffering on anyone in his path. We do not know now, and we probably never will be entirely clear why this tragedy came to pass, but hopefully, the lessons learned will provide a foundation for preventing future tragedies like this one.

Let’s take a moment to recount how Aaron Alexis got the access to the Navy Yard that allowed him to successfully enter the facility that fateful morning.

In 2007, Aaron Alexis joined the U.S. Navy. As with other service members, a background check was performed and he was granted a low level security clearance. After an honorable discharge from the Navy in 2011, Alexis was hired by a defense contractor who confirmed he possessed a valid security clearance.

This marked him as a trustworthy individual. Because of that security clearance and that job, Alexis was provided with an I.D. card that would authorize his access to certain facilities, including Building 197 at the Washington Navy Yard.

Shortly before 8 a.m., on September 16, 2013, Aaron Alexis drove to the front gate of the Washington Navy Yard and displayed his access card. He was admitted by security, parked his car, and walked to Building 197.

Upon entering that building, Alexis encountered two additional security layers: an automated turnstile which required a valid access card and an armed security guard posted near an entrance.

Unfortunately, these measures were designed primarily to prevent unauthorized access and not to screen for weapons. Officials probably thought that the people working there were trustworthy because they had security clearances and had been vetted.

Eight minutes after Aaron Alexis cleared security he began shooting co-workers using a shotgun he had successfully concealed.

In the wake of the shooting at the Washington Navy Yard, this Committee began a review of security practices and procedures highlighted by the attack.

Our first oversight hearing looked at the security clearance processes that federal agencies have implemented to determine who should have access to sensitive information or facilities. At that hearing we explored ways to improve the process, and were reminded that quality cannot be

sacrificed for speed. The purpose of today's hearing is to review how we physically secure federal facilities from attack.

In many instances, security measures begin long before a person approaches the facility. Because Mr. Alexis was able to maintain a security clearance, he was trusted as a defense contractor and granted access to the Navy Yard complex. Aaron Alexis exploited this trust, and hurt innocent people.

In the aftermath, it is only natural that we wonder if all people entering a federal facility – even employees – should be screened in some way. Should we – to borrow a phrase from Ronald Reagan – “trust, but verify?”

Workplace violence and insider threats are just some of the examples of the many undesirable threats facing our federal facilities. There are many other potential threats that agencies must attempt to detect and deter. In addition to active shooters, agencies must develop countermeasures for improved explosive devices, biological weapons, and other types of assaults.

Today's hearing will examine federal agencies' efforts to develop and maintain effective layers of security at their facilities and prevent future attacks on innocent people.

Facility security is not just about protecting the physical structure of a building, it is about safeguarding the millions of innocent people who work and visit these facilities on a daily basis. Today's hearing on facility security is also about honoring the memory of the twelve men and women who died on September 16, 2013, by learning from that incident and doing all that we can to prevent a similar tragedy from happening again.

People who know me know I like to say, “If something is not perfect, make it better.” My goal today is to figure out how we can do a better job protecting people at our federal facilities. We can start by asking some fundamental questions.

First, we need to ask: How do federal agencies determine what the threats are to their specific facilities?

Not every facility is the same. Large federal buildings in big cities – for example, the Alfred P. Murrah building in Oklahoma City – may be a target for terrorists because of their size and symbolism. However, the more likely threat to a small Social Security Administration office or an IRS Taxpayer Assistance Center is a tired or angry citizen reacting poorly out of impulse.

Second, we should ask: Are federal agencies properly assessing and prioritizing these threats?

I also frequently say, “The road to improvement is always under construction.” The world around us is constantly changing. We should always try to figure out how to respond to that and do things better. I also think the methods for securing our homeland should always be under construction, because the nature of the threat is always changing and evolving.

That leads me to my final question: How do agencies respond to these evolving threats?

A security measure that may work for one facility may not work for another. For example, not every facility might be able to be built 50 feet or more from the nearest public road in order to protect against a vehicle-borne threat.

I also want to know if federal agencies are sufficiently sharing best practices. Is the Department of Defense working with civilian agencies to share its expertise and experience?

For both military and civilian facilities, senior officials at a facility are responsible for determining which security measures should be implemented. However, civilian officials sitting on a local Facility Security Committee may have little or no training in security matters, whereas the commanding officer for a military installation has years of experience and education in security issues.

Most importantly, I want to know what actions different organizations have undertaken since the Navy Yard shooting to improve security at federal facilities.

Many departments and agencies bear some responsibility for securing federal facilities. This includes the Department of Defense and the General Services Administration, and even the Department of Energy. It also includes the Federal Protective Service, a component of the Department of Homeland Security responsible for protecting federal facilities owned or leased by the General Services Administration.

There is no doubt the Federal Protective Service has a difficult mission. That agency employs only about 1,000 law enforcement officers to protect more than 9,000 civilian federal facilities. These facilities are spread out all across the country.

Yet while the Federal Protective Service is responsible for assessing security at each of these facilities, it lacks complete authority to implement security measures. It may recommend installing metal detectors and x-ray screening equipment at a facility, but it is the local Facility Security Committee that decides whether to authorize and pay for those security measures.

As repeated Government Accountability Office (GAO) reports have highlighted, a number of internal management challenges have impeded the Federal Protective Service's ability to protect facilities. For example, the Federal Protective Service must complete the facility security assessments in a timely manner so that it can share them with the offices it protects. Because the Federal Protective Service has been unable to do that, other agencies have sought to complete their own facility security assessments, creating unnecessary duplication and waste.

The Federal Protective Service must also do a better job of tracking and overseeing training for the 14,000 contract guards it uses to protect facilities. The agency must ensure both its federal law enforcement officers and the armed contract security guards it uses are appropriately trained, equipped, and prepared.

Ensuring the training, equipment, and preparedness of federal law enforcement officers and armed contract security guards is central to providing for the security of the facilities safeguarded by the Federal Protective Service. This will require, at minimum, a greater focus on active shooter scenario training. In the wake of the shootings at the Navy Yard and the Wheeling, West Virginia Courthouse, we cannot afford to be ill-prepared for this type of threat.

While Director Eric Patterson has worked hard to improve the Federal Protective Service's performance, the agency has not always received the support it needed from Congress. I want to assure Director Patterson that I am committed to working with him to make the agency more efficient and more effective. We can start by focusing on the cost-saving or cost-neutral solutions that are much more likely to receive broad bipartisan support from Congress.

I hope that today's hearing will help us find better ways to improve security at all federal facilities. I believe there is much to be learned from the Navy Yard tragedy to help us prevent similar incidents in the future. With that, I welcome Dr. Coburn, and I look forward to his opening statement.