

Opening Statement of Chairman Thomas R. Carper
“Securing Radiological Materials: Examining the Threat Next Door”
June 12, 2014

As prepared for delivery:

A little over a year ago, the city of Boston was struck by a tragedy during the running of the 117th Boston Marathon. Two terrorists detonated pressure cooker bombs near the finish line, killing three and injuring nearly 300.

The horror of this attack will never be forgotten, but neither will the heroism that unfolded immediately afterwards. These acts of courage and selflessness saved countless lives.

Police, medical personnel, National Guardsmen, volunteers, runners and spectators all ran towards the blasts to provide immediate aid to the injured. These acts of courage and selflessness saved countless lives.

The tragic events of the 117th Boston Marathon remind us that we must constantly seek to counter the threats from homegrown terrorists and to improve our nation’s ability to anticipate – and prevent – the next attack.

A dirty bomb is any kind of crude explosive device that, when detonated, disperses radiation around and beyond the blast. If a dirty bomb successfully goes off, those who survive the blast can be exposed to harmful amounts of radiation that could cause sickness or even death. Moreover, a dirty bomb could render areas uninhabitable for many years, making it a highly disruptive weapon.

If the Boston Marathon terrorists had turned their pressure-cooker bombs into dirty bombs, then the consequences of that tragic day could have multiplied by an order of magnitude. Think about that for a minute.

For instance, when those police, medical personnel, volunteers, runners and spectators all ran toward the blast to help the injured, they could have been unknowingly exposed to harmful amounts of radiological material. In many cases, this material cannot be seen, smelled, felt, or tasted. In this hypothetical, what would have been a heroic display of courage and selflessness could have quickly spiraled into a far more deadly and disruptive situation.

Today’s hearing will focus on how we can ensure that this hypothetical situation never comes to pass. We will focus on the threat of a dirty bomb and specifically examine the security of radiological material here in communities across the country that can be used in a dirty bomb.

Two years ago, at the request of Senator Daniel Akaka, the Government Accountability Office (GAO) issued a report examining the government's efforts to secure radiological material in U.S. medical facilities.

GAO found that in many cases, this radiological material was all too vulnerable to theft or sabotage. Shortly thereafter, I joined Senator Akaka and Senator Casey in requesting that GAO audit the security of radiological material used at construction and industrial sites.

Unlike the radiological devices in hospitals that are stationary and large, industrial radiological sources are often found in small, highly portable devices, routinely used in open, populated areas. GAO will testify today on the security of these industrial radiological materials, but the messages from their audit are clear.

Despite government efforts, industrial radiological sources are far too vulnerable to theft or sabotage by terrorists or others wishing to do us harm. In fact, GAO found four cases where potential dirty bomb material was stolen between 2006 and 2012.

Moreover, GAO found two cases where individuals with extensive criminal histories were given unsupervised access to potential dirty bomb material. One of those individuals had been previously convicted of making "terroristic threats."

We will learn more about these vulnerabilities and what I think are some commonsense fixes from GAO, but let me just say this: we must do better. Given the consequences of a dirty bomb, there really is no excuse for the vulnerabilities identified by GAO. So I'll say it again, we must do better."

If we are to protect against the next Oklahoma City bombing, the next 9/11 or the next Boston Marathon bombing, we must stay several steps ahead of the terrorists. We must anticipate and neutralize their evolving ability to carry out terrorist plots well before they are ever conceived.

Today, we will also hear from three agencies that play a critical role in securing radiological material in the U.S. and preventing dirty bomb attacks from occurring.

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