

U.S. Senate Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee

“Adapting to Defend the Homeland Against the Evolving International Terrorist Threat”

December 6, 2017

Ranking Member Claire McCaskill

Opening Statement

Thank you, Chairman Johnson. Given Congress’ focus right now on funding the government and with the budget season shortly upon us, this hearing provides a well-timed opportunity to examine the administration’s counterterrorism strategy and priorities.

Since 9/11, we have relentlessly pursued a multifaceted counterterrorism campaign to protect our homeland from foreign threats. While this Committee generally focuses on security efforts here at home, today offers an opportunity for members who do not serve on the Defense committees to engage with the Department of Defense (DOD) on how DOD is taking the fight to the enemy abroad. We will also get another chance, coming on the heels of our annual threats hearing in September, to hear from the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) and the National Counterterrorism Center (NCTC) on their agencies’ vital work.

This hearing is titled “Adapting to Defend the Homeland Against the Evolving International Terrorist Threat.” For that reason, I invited the Department

of Homeland Security (DHS) to provide a witness, since its primary mission, as set in statute, it is “to prevent terrorist attacks within the United States and reduce the vulnerability of the United States to terrorism.” On that note, on Monday the Senate advanced Ms. Nielsen’s confirmation vote and I am pleased that the DHS will soon have permanent leadership. Mr. Taylor, I look forward to your testimony on behalf of the Department.

NCTC Director Nick Rasmussen testified before this committee in September that the most immediate threat to the United States is from Homegrown Violent Extremists, meaning people living in the United States who become radicalized and conduct attacks here at home. At that same hearing, DHS Acting Secretary Elaine Duke discussed how attackers’ techniques are evolving as they opt for “simple methods” to conduct attacks, using “guns, knives, vehicles, and other common items to engage in acts of terror.”

Preventing radicalization, as well as preventing and responding to attacks, demands training, support, and other resources for state and local governments, law enforcement, and first responders. I am deeply concerned that many essential counterterrorism programs that provide that support were reduced or outright eliminated in the President’s FY 18 budget.

To prevent Americans from becoming radicalized, DHS administers the Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) Grant Program that assists states, local governments, and nonprofit institutions in providing alternatives for individuals who have started down the road to extremism. Although Congress appropriated only \$10 million for DHS to award in grants, the Department received applications for ten times that amount, demonstrating the overwhelming interest communities have in tackling this problem. Despite that, the President's FY 18 budget requested zero funding for the CVE grant program.

I've mentioned this before, but it's worth repeating that in July, DHS announced 29 awards through the Complex Coordinated Terrorist Attacks (CCTA) Grant Program; Kansas City and St. Louis were both awarded money. Programs like this are essential to bolstering security in our cities. But the President's budget proposed eliminating this grant program, as well.

During her nomination hearing, I asked DHS Secretary nominee Kirstjen Nielsen if New York City relied on resources it got from any of the DHS counterterrorism grant programs to respond to the Halloween ramming attack; she had no doubt that they did. Communities count on programs like the Visible Intermodal Prevention and Response (VIPR) teams, Urban Areas Security Initiative, Complex Coordinated Terrorist Attack Grant Program and the Law

Enforcement Officer Reimbursement Program to protect Americans from terrorist attacks and keep our country safe. But this Administration is reducing and outright eliminating funding for initiatives. This administration has to start following the advice of its own agencies, experts, and our state and local officials on the ground who understand the threats our communities face.

I am glad you are all here today to talk about the essential work you and the women and men in your departments do every day to fight terrorism and protect our country. Thank you very much.