

Chairman Peters Opening Statement As Prepared for Delivery
Full Committee Hearing: Addressing the Gaps in America's Biosecurity Preparedness
February 17, 2022

I'd like to thank our witnesses for joining us today to help assess our readiness to protect Americans from biological threats to national security, including the Department of Homeland Security's ability to detect, mitigate, and deter these threats.

We will also discuss how this committee can work to ensure DHS's Countering Weapons of Mass Destruction, or CWMD, office and other government programs tasked with tackling biological threats, have the resources and tools needed to fulfill their mission.

Biological threats can emerge from any number of disease-causing agents such as bacteria, viruses, or toxins. Whether naturally occurring, accidental, or deliberate in origin, these agents can be used to harm humans, plants, and animals.

We have seen how naturally occurring biological threats, such as the virus that causes COVID-19, can significantly harm our communities if we are not adequately prepared for them.

We also face threats from biological weapons that have been manufactured and weaponized for the purpose of deliberately targeting Americans. For example, we have seen bad actors deliberately use anthrax, ricin, and other harmful biological agents, in attempted attacks, including targeting elected officials.

These bioweapons have the potential to cause everything from mass casualties and incapacitation, to agricultural destruction, and other serious disruptions to our economic and national security.

Compared to other weapons of mass destruction, bioweapons are cheaper to develop, can be deployed covertly, and often have a delayed onset, making them an appealing choice for bad actors to utilize in randomized and targeted acts.

In response to these threats, DHS has taken actions to bolster our nation's biodefenses, including the Biowatch Program and its replacement, the Biological Detection for the 21st Century Program, or BD21. These programs, by all accounts, have not measurably improved our nation's ability to identify possible biological threats, although they have improved the coordination between the federal government and local partners on addressing these threats.

In their 2021 report to Congress, the Government Accountability Office found that DHS's biosurveillance programs, including BD21, lack sufficient technology and other resources to carry out and define their mission.

I also remain concerned about the BioWatch program which has suffered a number of setbacks, including high rates of false positive tests, significant delays in identifying possible threats, and an inability to detect familiar threats.

The Committee is also responsible for considering the reauthorization of DHS' CWMD office before the end of 2023. This office has previously faced unsteady leadership, low morale, and an inability to retain qualified employees. Although there are signs these issues are improving, this body must consider whether structural changes at DHS are needed to ensure they can successfully combat biological and other threats.

In addition to bolstering the federal governments' readiness to tackle these threats, we must also support innovative efforts by other public and private entities.

These include programs in my home state of Michigan, which is home to vaccine manufacturers and experts developing decontamination techniques, as well as the University of Michigan-Flint's forthcoming biosecurity program, which I had the opportunity to discuss with their Chancellor earlier this week.

Michigan has also conducted exercises that test the responsiveness of state, local, and federal partners to biological attacks, and uses tests results to identify how we can improve our ability to combat these threats. Today's hearing will allow the Committee to examine how the federal government can build on these kinds of efforts.

I look forward to hearing from our panel of health care and national security experts, on how lawmakers can advance an effective and comprehensive strategy to protect all of our communities from all biological security threats.