



United States Senate

Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs

Chairman Joseph I. Lieberman, ID-Conn.

Full Committee Markup to Reauthorize the Department of Homeland Security
Chairman Joe Lieberman
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AS PREPARED FOR DELIVERY

Good morning and thanks to everyone for being here.

I am particularly proud to preside over this meeting today with Senator Collins to mark up a Department of Homeland Security reauthorization bill for the first time since DHS launched in March 2003.

We have been working on this legislation a long time, but it is especially fitting that we take it up now, three days after we observed the 10th anniversary of the 9/11 terror attacks. The Department, of course, is a direct progeny of that harrowing day ten years ago, when we all asked “how could this have happened to us?”

For the past eight years, this Committee has overseen the Department through its successes and its failures. We have watched as it evolved from its wobbly beginnings, erred during Hurricane Katrina, and matured into the organization it is today. We have the perspective to know that the Department is operating at a higher level now than at any time in the past. Its responses to Hurricane Irene and to the uncorroborated specific, credible threat last week were exactly on target.

We also know that the Department continues to be a challenge to manage, that it has wasted billions on poorly thought out or administered contracts and large-scale acquisitions – SBI-net being one of the most prominent. We know that the Department can be more efficient and thus more effective.

It is time now to update the Department’s authorizing law, translate several of its worthy programs to statute, eliminate others, nip and tuck to find cost savings, and to improve management to help the Department meet its missions better.

Let me describe some of its most important features:

I am particularly proud of a series of provisions to bring greater discipline to the Department’s acquisitions process, which could in turn save billions in taxpayer dollars now lost to waste or failure. This bill would establish a process to review proposed acquisitions and investments to better inform the Department’s decisions, strengthen acquisition oversight, and improve resource management across DHS. The position of this provision as the first section of the first title of legislation speaks to its importance.

The bill would also establish a division of cost analysis to improve the Department’s ability to provide accurate and independent cost estimates of major acquisitions. Similarly, we would encourage independent evaluations to determine the integrity of major acquisitions and improve planning and management. And we would require the Department to establish a program for the recruitment, training, and retention of an acquisition workforce.

To complement these reforms, we would require the Secretary to find cost efficiencies in several areas – including a 5 percent decrease in the DHS budget by consolidating overhead costs in cities around the country where the Department has multiple agencies.

We would eliminate the Office of Counter Narcotics Enforcement because its functions overlap with other offices in DHS and other government agencies and we would eliminate the Office of Cargo Security Policy, whose functions will be transferred to other officials within the Office of Policy.

We would also close out the Office for Domestic Preparedness, the Office of State and Local Government Coordination, and the Border and Transportation Security Directorate, which have all been out of commission for some time now.

We are including in this bill a requirement that the Secretary consolidate the Department's Washington headquarters at the St. Elizabeths by 2018 so DHS employees don't have to ping pong between 70 different offices within the Capitol region and instead can work more efficiently at one location. We know that the funding challenges the department faces with this project are severe, but we believe it is important that we signal that this project must continue.

The authorization bill also calls for the Secretary to designate someone to coordinate efforts against homegrown violent Islamist extremism, which we know poses a great threat to the nation.

On the subject of border security, we would establish a new Office of International Travel Security and Screening to combine related initiatives such as US Visit, the visa waiver program, and the Screening Coordination Office – all of which are key to keeping terrorists from traveling to and within the United States while facilitating visits by those who are our friends. We would require the Secretary of Homeland Security and the Secretary of State to work together to establish an electronic system to notify airlines when a traveler's visa to enter the U.S. is cancelled and another electronic system to allow DHS officials to review visa applications remotely – directly addressing problems uncovered by the aborted Christmas day bombing attempt a couple of years ago.

Regarding preparedness, response, and recovery, the bill would require the President to ensure that comprehensive plans exist throughout the federal government – and not just in FEMA -- to prevent, prepare for, protect against, respond to, and recover from disasters; and the Secretary would be required to appoint a FEMA official to coordinate catastrophic incident planning across the government.

To improve FEMA's performance in the middle of a disaster, we would strengthen FEMA's disaster response and recovery reserve workforce and create a Chief Management Officer within the agency to improve efficiency and quality, and work for cost savings.

Our preparedness for a WMD attack would take a big step forward with implementation of a provision requiring the Secretary to develop plans to communicate with residents in the vicinity of a nuclear, biological, radiological, or chemical incident. And we would require DHS to develop guidelines for responding to a WMD attack.

These are just a sampling of provisions in the authorization bill that are necessary at this juncture in the Department's history to improve its management, eliminate redundant programs, and increase transparency. It is also fiscally responsible.

But it is really a testament to the Department's central role in the security of our nation and a recognition of the Department's 230,000 employees across the country who never let up in their vigilance to safeguard the American People.

I believe this authorization bill deserves your support.

Senator Collins