Understanding ISIS in order to Better Protect the Homeland

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Chairman Ron Johnson, Ranking Member Thomas Carper and members of the Committee, thank you for the honor of testifying here today on such a serious and important issue. I have been in the field of building community resilience to violent extremism for over twenty years now and the process of radicalization and recruitment has dramatically changed in that time. Though the US government and our allies have spent millions of dollars in research to determine what causes radicalization, there is still no such thing as a terrorist profile and no _**one**_ single factor that can predict who will become a terrorist.[1]

What we do know from empirical research on convicted terrorists and terrorist incidents are some common indicators that exist in many of those cases, which may make an individual more vulnerable to recruitment and radicalization. We also learned that approximately 40% of those arrested for ISIS related crimes in the US were committed by Muslim converts[2] - that means the perpetuator grew up in a house that did _**not**_ practice Islam. This tells us that no family is immune from the radicalization threat and therefore, the solution lies in a holistic approach. Furthermore, lone wolf terrorism is an increasing trend, given that 74% of terrorist attacks in the U.S. over the past six years were conducted by lone wolves.[3]

However, just because we cannot predict who will become a terrorist, it does not mean we cannot or should not do anything or that anything we do, cannot be measured.

In fact, we can design programs, clearly articulating a theory of change that connects program activities with the potential risk factors[4] we are trying to ameliorate. Then we can measure, using traditional and innovative evaluation tools, whether we reduced those vulnerabilities in the program participants.

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[1] John Horgan, "Individual Disengagement: A Psychological Analysis," In T. Bjorjo & J. Horgan (Eds.), _Leaving Terrorism Behind_ (pp. 17_28). New York, NY: Routledge; and John Horgan, The Psychology of Terrorism, Routledge, New York, 2014, page 87.
[2] Lorenzo Vidino, Seamus Hughes, "ISIS in America: From Retweets to Raqqa", _Program on Extremism, George Washington University_, December 2015
[3] "Lone Wolf Report," _Southern Poverty Law Center_, February 11, 2015. https://www.splcenter.org/20150212/lone-wolf-report.
[4] Since there are no studies to date that have demonstrated a causal link between any one risk factor or combination of factors, and an individual becoming a terrorist, our use of the term 'risk factor' is colloquial and not predictive of who will become radicalized.

At WORDE, that is exactly what we did to create, adapt, and evaluate the efficacy of our community-led program known as the Montgomery County Model. I am pleased to say after two years of rigorous scientific evaluation, it is now the *only* evidence-based Countering Violent Extremism [CVE] program in the country.

Utilizing a "cluster model" approach,[5] WORDE has identified five clusters of *potential* risk factors of radicalization. They include sociological motivators; psychological conditions; ideology/belief/and values; political grievances; and economic factors.

For example, a significant amount of social science research suggests a strong association between mental illness, social isolation, and lone wolf terrorism.[6] In fact, 61% of lone wolf terrorists had previous contact with mental health services.[7]

While there is no evidence to suggest terrorists have higher levels of *severe* mental illness than the general population, depressive and anxiety symptoms are more prevalent in those who sympathize with violent acts or terrorism.[8]

Social alienation, which often results from discrimination, marginalization or immigrant acculturation challenges, has also been identified as a leading factor for individuals to seek support from a social network that can provide a sense of belongingness or self-worth.[9]

Another factor that figured prominently amongst post 9/11 lone wolf terrorists, was about 76% broadcasted their intent, and often more than once.[10] This tells us that family members or peers are the first ones who could intervene in the life of a vulnerable individual, *if* they were properly trained on the warning signs and encouraged to use help-seeking behaviors.

Finally, we learned that stigmatizing the Muslim community and having law enforcement lead all our interactions with that community was only exacerbating the lack of trust and cooperation.[11] It rarely led to more tips on potential threats and it provided a lot of negative propaganda for the recruiters who claim that the West was at war with Islam and Muslims.

Using this research-informed foundation for our programming, our objective was to decrease the social isolation of Muslim communities by joining them with numerous other community members—including faith leaders, county officials, social service providers, and educators—to promote social cohesion and public safety. It is important to note that the scope of our collaboration is not just limited to terrorism. We focus on Internet safety, treating the mentally ill, and preparing for disasters—a whole range of public safety threats including building

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[5] "Assessment: A Model for Understanding the Motivations of Homegrown Violent Extremists," *Department of Homeland Security,* December 16, 2011.

[6] Emily Corner and Paul Gill, "A False Dichotomy? Mental Illness and Lone-Actor Terrorism," *Law and Human Behavior,* Vol.39, No. 1 (2015): 23-34.

[7] ibid.

[8] Kamaldeep Bhui, Brian Everitt & Edgar Jones, "Might Depression, Psychosocial Adversity, and Limited Social Assets Explain Vulnerability to and Resistance Against Violent Radicalization?" *in PLOS ONE*, ed.Paul Davis & Kim Cragin, 2014.

[9] Arie Kruglanski, Xiaoyan Chen, Mark Dechesne, Shira Fishman and Edward Orehek "Fully committed: Suicide Bombers' Motivation and the Quest for Personal Significance" *Political Psychology*, 2009, Volume 30, Issue 3, 331-357.

[10] Mark Hamm and Ramon Spaaj, "Lone Wolf Terrorism in America: Using Knowledge of Radicalization Pathways to Forge Prevention Strategies," February 2015 https://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/nij/grants/248691.pdf

[11] "The Challenge and Promise of Using Community Policing Strategies to Counter Violent Extremism." *Triangle Center on Terrorism and Homeland Security, Sanford School of Public Policy, Duke University*, January 2016

resilience against violent extremist recruitment. Our public and private partners are united by the shared mission of promoting the common good and preventing harm, which naturally includes preventing terrorism.

Our evaluations indicate that this model has great potential to revolutionize traditional methods of community policing by allowing the community to lead and by creating relationships of trust and respect amongst the diverse community stakeholders rather than separating them off into silos that breed further distrust and isolation.

This relationship amongst community members—across racial, ethnic, and sectarian lines is more critical now than ever. Domestic terror attacks are creating fault lines in our societies that will only lead to more violence, if they are not repaired. The separation of Muslims from non-Muslims feeds into the bifurcated worldview of the terrorists who say—it is us vs. them—the West against Islam. A comprehensive prevention agenda therefore must include programs that prevent that divide— so that there is only an "us" against the terrorists.

In response to the need for specialized individual interventions that address the psycho-social aspects of radicalization, we added an intervention component to provide counseling and direct services for those who may be at risk of radicalization or other anti-social behavior, before they choose a path of violence. Ours is the first of its kind in the US.

Although we have not found a way to prove a counterfactual-- that our services prevented someone from becoming a terrorist -- we can prove through pre and post clinical assessments that our clients have had a reduction in potential risk factors and an increase in protective factors.

Besides the focus on psycho-social needs of the clients, our team can also tackle the ideological risk factors by referring the individual to a mentor.

It used to be that becoming a violent extremist took years of religious indoctrination. The process was long because the Islam they preached was so foreign to mainstream interpretations of the faith that they had to undo what Muslims believed for centuries and because their call to suicide and killing of innocent civilians was, quite frankly, unappealing.

In the interim, US counter terrorism strategies were so effective that many of the radical preachers were pushed out of public spaces and forced to go into hiding. The ideologues who promoted violent Islamism also realized the years of religious indoctrination was inefficient and maybe they should pursue a different class of recruit.

Unfortunately, the civil war in Syria, the continued persecution of Sunnis in Iraq and upheavals across the Middle East, provided the perfect opportunity for violent extremists to reformulate their strategy. Constant depictions of torture and bombing of families in the region motivated young Muslims across the world to go and join the 'humanitarian jihad'—to save the Muslims who were dying at the hands of brutal dictators. Many of them were not even radicalized until they reached the battlefield. They thought they were going to be heroes, not suicide bombers in the marketplace. *Heroism was infinitely easier to sell*, particularly for vulnerable individuals who sought a sense of purpose or who suffered from thrill-seeking complexes. Suddenly as if almost

overnight, the terrorists had discovered the holy grail of recruitment: encourage people to come and build, not to come and die. That message would appeal to young and old alike, Muslim and non-Muslim. Anyone who saw the global powers as corrupt and oppressive or that their societies rejected them for being "different" were welcomed in this new utopia of misfits.

As a result, taking someone off the path now requires more than just a Muslim preacher. The process should also include a culturally proficient, trained professional that can resolve the feelings of cultural homelessness, and help the individual find a sense of belonging and purpose in *our* society. It may also require psychiatric care and prescribing medication to deal with symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder or depression.

Therefore, our clinicians take the range of issues presented in each case and document them in their initial assessments. Scores on the assessment and the clinician's observations govern what treatment modalities will be applied. After several individually tailored sessions, a second assessment is administered to measure the reduction in the initial factors presented; and, any increase in protective factors. That data is collated with case notes and clinical observations to determine whether the client has stabilized enough to be discharged or alternatively, has demonstrated the need for more chronic, long-term care and is referred to the relevant providers. Using both innovative and traditional assessment tools, we can measure outcomes and efficacy of the treatment provided.

Since our program is a clinical model and follows the protected health information guidelines of professionals, our client information is kept entirely outside the purview of law enforcement unless an individual is an "imminent threat" or a "threat to national security," which requires us to report the case to law enforcement. We have no formal legal guidance on what constitutes a national security threat and we do not know what would happen to those individuals we report. We also have not received referrals of already radicalized cases from law enforcement directly. However, in other parts of the country, such programs are being initiated by law enforcement; or, there are *no* intervention or prevention programs at all. Simply put, there is no consistency in the process and no federal guidance on what should happen and when.

I can tell you from experience actually running an intervention program, practitioners will need guidelines on what behaviors would trigger their duty to warn law enforcement, *if* we want to encourage more organizations to be active in this space.

The government has created numerous violence prevention programs and alternatives to prison sentencing for other sorts of crimes; there is no reason why we cannot establish guidelines for violent extremist cases as well. It is impractical to think we can arrest our way out of this problem. With thousands of individuals across the country that could be vulnerable to radicalization; it is irresponsible of us not to create alternatives.

Running an intervention program can be risky, expensive and complicated, but that should not discourage us from finding the right solutions. There needs to be more focus placed on developing legal guidelines for practitioners, including how we balance the privacy rights of clients with our national security interests.

Most importantly, communities need resources to create multi-disciplinary, community-based prevention programs that can operate independently of law enforcement; *as well as* diversion

programs that can actually treat radicalized individuals in a way that is governed by the laws of informed consent and monitored by federal or local law enforcement agencies. One source of funding could be DHS' Urban Area Security Initiative (UASI), which enhances regional capabilities to prevent, protect, and mitigate terrorist attacks, major disasters and other emergencies.

Though many federal agencies play an important role in protecting the homeland, as long as the FBI has jurisdiction over terrorism investigation cases and is the lead domestic counter terrorism agency in the US, treating radicalized cases will require their participation. I do hope they explore such partnerships with communities, local police, social service providers and others who are interested in setting up diversion programs in a way that is transparent, collaborative and effective. I am encouraged to hear the interagency CVE Task Force, under the leadership of DHS, includes the FBI and the Department of Justice so these issues can be addressed in a coordinated effort.

Finally, no prevention program would be complete without also confronting the online threat. Many young people are either unaware or ignore the long-term consequences of inappropriate uses of social media and exposure to Internet predators. They post personal information about themselves, communicate with complete strangers and run the risk of being recruited by an Internet predator—whether that's a pedophile or a terrorist. This is a systemic problem across the country and really requires national and local campaigns to promote cyber-civility and security amongst youth and their parents.

With funding from a local youth media fund, WORDE created a cyber-civility curriculum that teaches kids about responsible cyber security and builds awareness about avoiding predators online. We provide a similar training for parents so they can learn how to monitor their children's use of the Internet and be the first line of defense against radicalization or recruitment. It is totally unacceptable to hear from parents, "I had no idea what my child was doing online."

These are just some examples of what a prevention / intervention program can do and I cannot stress enough how important it is to have a variety of non-law enforcement "off-ramps" in the portfolio of activities.

Preventing violent extremism through engagement, education, and specialized interventions is a departure for traditional law enforcement and will require all the stakeholders to undergo a paradigm shift that emphasizes trust, collaboration and multidisciplinary strategies. It also requires--that while the law enforcement community has an important role to play, it should ultimately play a supporting role to communities and other governmental organizations that are better suited to operate in the pre-criminal space.

In conclusion, through generous funding of the Department of Justice, we are developing training manuals and teaching modules to help other communities adapt our evidence-based model for their unique needs. We have begun replicating the program for neighboring Prince George's County and look forward to training other jurisdictions as well.