

Opening Statement of Ranking Member Fred Thompson
Hearing, "Local Role in Homeland Security"

Tuesday, December 11, 2001

Mr. Chairman, thank you for holding this hearing on the local role in homeland security. We have held a number of hearings on homeland security and bioterrorism, and one theme that keeps coming up is the importance of local officials in responding to a terrorist attack.

As we have been reminded repeatedly throughout our recent hearings, local firefighters, law enforcement officials, emergency management officials, public health officials and health care providers will be the first to respond to a terrorist attack. Unfortunately, we have also heard that our focus at the federal level has been primarily on a myriad of programs, some of which overlap, spread out over forty agencies.

One of our witnesses at the bioterrorism hearing, Dr. Amy Smithson, made an observation in a report that I think bears repeating, and which reflects what we will be hearing from our witnesses today. Dr. Smithson noted that only \$315 million of the total \$8.4 billion counterterrorism budget in 2000 went to the front lines in the form of training, equipment grants and planning assistance. That is a remarkably small piece of the pie.

I'm glad that we will have the opportunity today to hear from John White, the Director of Emergency Management in Tennessee. Mr. White has worked in emergency management for thirty-five years and certainly has an excellent perspective on this issue.

One point Director White makes in his written statement that I think is very important and insightful is that local and state emergency officials have, in effect, been preparing for terrorist attacks for years. For example, many have expressed concern about the safety of our nuclear plants in the wake of the events of September 11th. But as Director White points out, his office has been conducting exercises to prepare for accidents at nuclear plants for years. People are now becoming more concerned about chemical attacks, but his emergency management agency was conducting training and response exercises to deal with hazardous material spills and accidents well before the recent attacks. Just last Thursday we heard from Memphis Deputy Police Chief Charles Cook about some rather extensive interagency exercises to prepare for a wide variety of emergencies and disasters.

In short, we have infrastructures in place at the state and local levels already at least somewhat prepared to respond to attacks. Perhaps rather than pouring money into more

and more federal programs and response teams, the first priority should be to determine how we can best coordinate support, training and exercises with local officials to take advantage of the programs already in existence.

As we have heard previously, and as I believe Dr. Caldwell will testify today, the same point can be made about our public health systems. Clearly, we need to take steps to improve the detection, surveillance and response capabilities of our public health departments and our private healthcare providers. We can build on systems already in place and reap the added benefit of strengthening our preparedness in the healthcare arena overall.

Finally, I believe we will also hear today about the need for better communication in the law enforcement arena. We've all read about some confrontations between the FBI and local law enforcement. Both Director Mueller and Attorney General Ashcroft have announced measures to try to facilitate communication between local and federal officials as well as to share more information when necessary. I look forward to hearing from our witnesses today on this subject as well.

Again, Mr. Chairman, thank you for holding this hearing and I look forward to our discussion today about how best to support our very valuable local resources.