

Written testimony of Adrian Garcia, Sheriff, Harris County, Texas

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U.S. House Homeland Security Committee  
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Thank you distinguished members of the Border and Maritime Security Subcommittee of the House Homeland Security Committee, and thank you to the gentleman from South Texas, Congressman Cuellar, for inviting me to provide testimony about Harris County, Texas. The county is otherwise known as the Houston area, which includes 33 other municipalities besides the city of Houston, with a population of 4.2 million diverse constituents whom I serve. It’s a major international crossroads for commerce, immigration and recreation. And it’s growing everyday.

As sheriff, I oversee the nation’s third largest jail as well as the policing of the unincorporated areas of the county, where about 1.5 million people live. That population number is equal to the city of Philadelphia or the city of Phoenix.

But the Harris County Sheriff’s Office is also the lead law enforcement agency of the Houston Ship Channel Security District, a corridor that is home to 40 percent of the nation’s chemical manufacturing capacity and 14 percent of its oil refining capacity, including a large amount of jet fuel. The waterway obviously is the main, two-way transit-way for all of this crucial activity. It’s said that a shutdown of the Ship Channel costs the local economy \$300 million a day – not to mention the obvious impact that such a disruption could have on the national economy. This is also where you’ll find the Port of Houston, which has led the nation in foreign tonnage for 14 years.

I have two main messages about the job we do on the Ship Channel.

ONE: We have done a miraculous job coordinating with a stunning number of sister law enforcement agencies, industry groups, boards, city government, county government, state government and the federal government. If there is such a thing as model communication and maximization of resources among overlapping bureaucracies, you are most likely to find it along the Ship Channel in Harris County, Texas. Perhaps this is by necessity, because we know how important our port is to the rest of the world. We were also not surprised when the intelligence from Osama bin Laden’s compound indicated that Al-Qaeda has considered bombing the kind of oil tankers that are every day sights at the Ship Channel.

TWO: We need additional resources to help us at the local level so we can stay ahead of domestic and international terrorism. Our biggest challenge in securing the Ship Channel is the woeful shortage of these resources – namely, funding from a variety of government levels.

However, even with the need of additional resources, my deputies are doing an incredible job in keeping this vital infrastructure safe -- and they are doing so on a 24/7 basis. My deputies patrol the waterway on sheriff's office patrol boats that can respond to any disturbance or suspicious activities spotted by the human or electronic eyes or by other forms of technology. We are well coordinated with the US Coast Guard, the Merchant Marine, other government agencies and private stakeholders. But the bottom line is that we have yet to be able to deploy our personnel to the extent that this type of responsibility demands. And the reason is that, despite the \$30 million in Homeland Security grants we have received from the federal government for new hardware, these grants do not allow for investment into the most critical of resources; and that is the full-time deputies and the necessary training they need to be effective in policing a unique environment like the Houston Ship Channel.

One of our financial problems is local. The Ship Channel Security District collects assessment fees from its 100 or so private industry members and pays the money to county government in return for security services and enhancements. But the national economy has harmed property values in the Houston area, and these values are the foundation of the tax base the county uses to fund all of its operations, including my agency. The county cut its overall spending by forcing a hiring freeze. I have lost several hundred employees as a result since October 2009, with more than 120 just from our Patrol Bureau. All of my crime-fighting programs are strained; I have had to pay an exorbitant amount of overtime just to staff my jail at required state standards.

And yet, we have not been awarded any COPS grants from the Justice Department, apparently because law enforcement agencies that have had to lay off employees got first priority. I hope Congress and the administration will recognize that a forced hiring freeze - not even replacing attrition - is in fact a layoff -- especially when it prevents us from deploying more crime-fighters to the national security asset known as the Houston Ship Channel. For now I have a small detail of deputies assigned to water patrol, and they have done everything from escorting Liquid Natural Gas vessels to directing fishing boats and recreational watercraft away from restricted areas. I would love to be able to add bodies to this first line of defense but cannot do so without funding from local and/or national sources. Fortunately, the on-the-water team is backed by patrol officers who handle regular calls for service on that east side of our county. For now, they are our stop gap force. We welcome any kind of assistance from Washington, whether it comes from COPS grants or elsewhere.

To further complicate our work, the Houston Ship Channel is not entirely in Houston. In fact Houston is just one of eight cities with acreage in the Ship Channel Security District. Other partners in the security district include the Texas Department of Transportation, the Metropolitan Transit Authority, the county's Office of Emergency Management and its other agencies, and the University of Houston. The security district has an 11-member board, eight of whose members come from private industry. Each of those members comes from one of four Ship Channel zones. One board member is appointed by the Harris County Mayors and Councils Association, which has 36 member cities, but their appointee has to come from one of the eight cities along the Channel. If that's not enough to boggle your mind, consider that the Security District was only able to launch in 2009 because of required enabling laws that passed the state Legislature two years earlier.

The Houston Ship Channel Security District is a true model for how multi-jurisdictional agencies should address a common mission. The Coast Guard controls the entrance to the mouth of the Ship Channel. Customs and Border Patrol regulates cargo. As has been disclosed in public, we watch the Ship Channel through a combination of wireless and fiber-optic communications, surveillance and detection cameras, and many other forms of technology applications and systems - that a colleague once referred to as our "ring of steel". We also fall under the Area Maritime Security Council, which takes a regional approach to maritime and border security in Houston and nearby Galveston, Freeport and Texas City, Texas.

We are not deterred by complexity of what it takes to protect such a national asset as the Houston Ship Channel, but I am taken back by how difficult it is to get the necessary support through such programs like COPS to make sure that we can continue to deter or detect interested terrorists. My staff has been creative and diligent about achieving the levels of cooperation we have with all stakeholders. We all want to meet the highest expectations of our community, of the nation and of the world, but we need your help to stay on top of our mission. Thank you.