

Testimony of Rep. Bill Pascrell, Jr.

**Subcommittee on Cybersecurity, Infrastructure Protection and Security
Technologies
and the
Subcommittee on Emergency Preparedness, Response and
Communications**

“H.R. __, the ‘WMD Prevention and Preparedness Act of 2011’”

Thursday, June 23, 2011

Good morning Chairman Lungren, Ranking Member Clarke, Chairman Bilirakis and Ranking Member Richardson, and thank you for holding this important joint Subcommittee Hearing and for your invitation to testify this morning. I want to recognize the Chairman and Ranking Member of the Full Committee, Mr. King and Mr. Thompson, for their friendship and leadership on the Committee and their stewardship of its important work.

I also want to thank the Committee for inviting Sheriff Richard Berdnik of Passaic County, New Jersey, to testify before you today on the subsequent panel. Passaic County is a part of the Jersey City/Newark Urban Area Security Initiative, one of the six Tier 1 regions considered at greatest risk of a terrorist attack. I know that the Sheriff will be able to provide to you all valuable insights into the role that his Department plays in preparing for and responding to a terrorist attack, and the effectiveness of the federal government’s state and local partnership efforts.

I am here this morning to discuss the WMD Preparedness and Prevention Act of 2011, which I, along with Chairman King, will be introducing tomorrow. I am proud of all the work that went into this legislation, and I am especially proud that it is bipartisan. Democrats and Republicans may not always agree on every issue, but I think there is a broad consensus on this Committee, from Members of both parties, that the safety and security of our country is our highest priority.

Last year, Chairman King and I came together to craft legislation after the release of the WMD Commission’s report: World at Risk. Under the leadership of Senator Bob Graham and Senator Jim Talent, that report gave us some very sobering findings. I am happy to see my former Small Business Committee Chairman, Senator Talent, here today. Particularly, their finding that under our

current readiness, a WMD attack is 'likely' to occur by 2013, gave us all pause and really gave us a sense of urgency that action was needed.

Today, even after the death of Osama bin Laden, we know that terror groups like Al Qaeda are still out there plotting attacks against Americans, and that they continue to be committed to obtaining nuclear and biological weapons. The Commission gave the country particularly low marks for bioterrorism preparedness and our country's oversight of laboratories working with some of the most dangerous diseases.

Both Mr. King and myself, being members from the New York/New Jersey region, are all too familiar with the devastation and tragedy that surrounds an attack with a weapon of mass destruction. Sheriff Berdnik was a 9/11 first responder himself. We must do everything in our power to ensure that nothing like 9/11 ever happens on our soil again. The thought of a WMD attack anywhere in our region is too horrific for words.

Using the WMD Commission's report as a guide, Chairman King and I first introduced this legislation back in 2010, with the support and endorsement of the Commissioners. While our bill passed this Committee, it was, unfortunately, not considered by the entire House of Representatives. This, to me, is unacceptable.

As the WMD Commission stated in their report, it is unacceptable that now nearly ten years after September 11th we do not have a comprehensive national strategy to counter the threat that WMD poses to our country. One year later, and hopefully a little wiser, we are reintroducing this bill. I hope it will be swiftly considered by this Committee, and that jurisdictional turf battles will not stop the full House and Senate from passing this important legislation as soon as possible.

This year's legislation retains the comprehensive approach to securing our country against weapons of mass destruction: Prevention and Preparedness, Protection, Response, and Recovery. The updated bill recognizes some of the progress that has been made by the Administration over the last year, particularly in laboratory biosecurity, and also contains some important new provisions that I would like to highlight.

Importantly, the bill addresses findings from the Government Accountability Office on the state of our biodefense enterprise and creates an entirely new, top down approach centered at the White House. This includes establishing a new Special Assistant to the President for Biodefense who will be responsible for

crafting a federal biodefense plan, and putting together a yearly cross-cutting biodefense budget, which will help streamline cross-agency efforts and improve efficiency.

The bill also includes a new provision that will allow the Secretary of Health and Human Services to make surplus vaccines with short shelf lives from our Strategic National Stockpile to our state and local first responders. As we all know, our cops and firefighters are on the front lines of our homeland security, and if there is a biological attack, they will be the first ones on the scene. Ensuring that they are vaccinated will not only prevent them from harm, but better enable them to assist other victims and perform their jobs in the response. All across the bill, language has been streamlined to better integrate our state and local first responders and to encourage their participation.

Passage of this legislation is not a silver bullet that will fully immunize us from the threats that a weapon of mass destruction poses to our country. For example, our first responders still lack a nationwide interoperable communications network, one of the recommendations of the 9/11 commission and an essential component of any response. Chairman King has introduced legislation that I strongly support to establish this network and I hope that Congress considers and passes it soon.

Additionally, funding for our various Homeland Security State and Local grant programs that help at-risk areas prepare and secure sensitive infrastructure, are under severe funding constraints. Grant programs for our Cops and Firefighters to purchase equipment and ensure they have adequate personnel are slated for cuts. We must find the funding in the federal budget to ensure that these programs are fully funded, and that we have the resources we need to protect our country.

In the years since the attacks on 9/11 we have all said, on a bipartisan basis, that our homeland security strategy must be proactive and not simply reactive. As an original member of the Committee on Homeland Security, created in the wake of these attacks, and representing a district that lost 40 souls in the attacks, these issues are near and dear to my heart. The Committee, Congress as a whole, and the Executive Branch must be committed to doing everything in our power to ensuring that something like this never happens again. Passing this bill into law will go a long way towards to establishing a comprehensive protection and response plan to a WMD attack, and it must be enacted as soon as possible.

Again, thank you for the opportunity to testify today.