

RANKING MEMBER LAURA RICHARDSON (D-CA) OPENING STATEMENT

Open Markup Session Subcommittee on Emergency Preparedness, Response, and Communications

December 8, 2011 at 10AM

I would like to thank Chairman Bilirakis for convening today's markup to consider three bipartisan bills which support the needs of first responders and enhance the Nation's preparedness.

The Medical Metropolitan Response System grant program is vital to ensuring we plan, train, and acquire the necessary equipment for potential mass casualty events caused by terrorism or natural disasters. MMRS is a relatively small but effective grant program that now covers approximately 75% of the country's population.

As the original co-sponsor of H.R. 1411, I believe that we must ensure funding and continuation of this vital program as a "stand alone program." Our local responders need this assistance to effectively respond to a terrorist attack using a weapon of mass destruction or, even, a large-scale health epidemic.

I applaud the Chairman's effort to correct one of the many flaws in the 2012 DHS Appropriations Act and provide free-standing funding for this critical program. The larger lesson should be that when critical homeland security grant programs are cut, first responder capabilities suffer.

Additionally, I support H.R. 3563, the "Integrated Public Alerts and Warning System Modernization Act of 2011". We all know the important role that emergency alerts play in saving lives. This year, alerts assisted communities devastated by natural disasters, most notably tornados in Missouri and Alabama. A fully-functional IPAWS system will help save more lives. I would note that earlier this year, during consideration of comprehensive Department of Homeland Security authorization legislation, I offered similar language as an amendment and it was accepted on a bipartisan basis.

Finally, I am pleased that the Committee is considering my bill, H.R. 1129, which will improve FEMA and state and local governments' management of the Homeland Security Grant Program. The Homeland Security Grant Management Improvement is the product of recommendations that I have received from the California and Los Angeles homeland security advisors, the National Governors Association, and a 2009 report prepared by FEMA.

The bill addresses three primary concerns. First, the bill prohibits FEMA from deciding unilaterally to require that state and local governments spend a specific percentage of their homeland security grant on one activity. To be clear, H.R. 1129 does not impact in any way statutory set-asides, such as the 25 percent requirement for the Law Enforcement Terrorism Prevention Program, which I support. It does, however, prevent these critical grant programs from adopting an ineffective "one-size fits all" approach that dilutes the value of homeland security grants and restores to state and local governments the ability to identify and address their unique homeland security needs.

Second, the bill directs FEMA to evaluate whether state and local governments have the resources necessary to effectively manage their homeland security grant awards. During these tough budgetary times, it is critical that we ensure that every grant dollar is spent wisely, and in a manner that is best advances our National Security Goals. We cannot afford for money to be wasted because of poor planning or ineffective management.

Finally, state and local government have urged FEMA to streamline their grant guidance to avoid significant year-over-year changes that hinder long-term planning and to simplify the application process. To this end, H.R. 1129 directs FEMA to examine the feasibility of issuing multi-year grant guidance.

Again, H.R. 1129 will help give our communities the tools necessary to build homeland security capabilities and be good stewards of taxpayer dollars. I encourage my colleagues to support this vital legislation.