

Ranking Member Brian Higgins (D-NY) Opening Statement

"Beyond Borders: Are the Department of Homeland Security's International Agreements Ensuring Actionable Intelligence to Combat Threats to the U.S. Homeland?"

Subcommittee on Counterterrorism and Intelligence

July 30, 2012

The Department of Homeland Security has several international agreements designed to continue to keep our nation secure while working with foreign governments. These agreements enhance security and promote travel and trade.

Western New York knows all too well the necessity of having strong international agreements. We neighbor Canada and there is an unprecedented amount of travel and trade that occurs between this area and our neighboring country.

In February 2011, Canadian Prime Minister Harper and President Obama signed the Beyond the Border Declaration. This declaration is to be a long term partnership built upon a perimeter approach to security and economic competitiveness.

The White House released its Beyond the Border action plan and DHS plays an integral role. The action plan addresses a wide range of areas of cooperation between the two countries. Many of which this Subcommittee has examined.

The action plan includes the U.S. and Canada collaborating to address threats early through information sharing and by improving intelligence. It also includes sharing information and intelligence in support of law enforcement.

This is extremely important because in this Subcommittee we have heard from experts who testified that Hezbollah, which is a terrorist proxy for Iran, Syria, and Venezuela has an active membership in fourteen North American cities, including in Toronto, which is 90 miles from Western New York.

The action plan also includes an approach to screening inbound cargo arriving from offshore and establishing robust entry and exit systems at the border. This action plan seems like a much needed step in the right direction; however, I have lingering questions as to how its elements will be implemented. For instance, how can such a robust plan exist for Northern Border areas, yet this area is not considered "high risk" enough for state and locals in this area to receive funding under the Urban Area Security Initiative "UASI" program?

Without USAI funding, the local law enforcement and emergency personnel will to sustain some of the advancements it made since 9/11. How can they be expected to work with the federal partners without this necessary funding?

How will the interoperability capacity be increased under the action plan? The lack of interoperable communications has been an issue since September 11th and we have yet to fix it. What under this plan will be done to assist in this gap?

With regard to cargo screening, the action plan raised the possibility of pre-inspection of U.S.-bound cargo traffic on the Canadian side of the border crossing. The Peace Bridge is the second busiest crossing at the U.S.-Canada border. Expediting traffic at the bridge is essential to the economic future of Western New York. A pre-inspection pilot should be held at the Peace Bridge and it would go a long way toward improving congestion at the bridge.

I am enthused about having a plan to that assists in our keeping the Northern Border secure and accessible, but it is important that this action plan works for the personnel that work tirelessly in the border areas to mitigate threats and ensure lawful trade.

The success of the Western New York economy and safety is undoubtedly tied to Canada. I look forward to hearing testimony on how this action plan and other international agreements are will be used to strengthen security and competitiveness.