

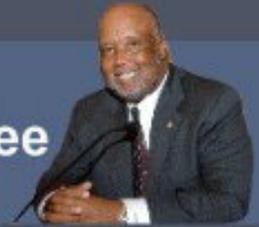
## NEWS ALERT



U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

# Homeland Security Committee

*Rep. Bennie G. Thompson, Ranking Member*



**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

## **Statement of Ranking Member Bennie G. Thompson**

### ***Full Committee Markup***

March 23, 2016 (Washington) – Today, Committee on Homeland Security Ranking Member Bennie G. Thompson (D-MS) delivered the following prepared remarks for the full Committee markup:

“I would like to begin by expressing my deep condolences to the people of Belgium and all who were affected by yesterday’s heinous and cowardly, coordinated terrorist attacks. Details are still emerging about the attacks, but it appears that they were designed to send a chilling message far beyond Belgium’s borders. Now is a time for heightened vigilance. As a nation, we must remain focused on threats posed by lone wolves that may, or may not, have a direct connection to terrorist organizations.

For its part, the Department of Homeland Security and its Federal partners should continue to support our international partners, particularly those that have last-point-of-departure airports to the United States, bolster the visa waiver program as well as DHS’ overseas international programs that vet and screen individuals seeking to enter the United States, and identify and disrupt foreign fighters who may seek to travel to or from the United States. Appropriately, today, the Committee will consider legislation I authored that is focused on “pushing our borders out”.

H.R. 4780, the “Department of Homeland Security Strategy for International Programs Act” would require DHS to develop a Department-wide strategy for how it grows overseas screening and vetting programs. This approach will help ensure that when DHS prioritizes expanding Preclearance in a certain country or seeks to establish a Visa Security Unit in another, those efforts are coordinated and in line with the Department’s risk-based priorities.

Another timely measure is H.R. 4698, the so-called “SAFE GATES Act of 2016.” This legislation, authored by Representative Katko, focuses on strengthening the security of international airports with direct flights to the United States. Though the provisions of the bill largely codify existing TSA efforts, moving this legislation sends a message that this Committee is vested in TSA engaging with international partners to raise the level of aviation security overseas.

I am also pleased that today we will be considering four other measures that speak to the Committee’s oversight findings regarding various Department of Homeland Security challenges. They are H.R. 4509, the “State and High-Risk Urban Area Working Group Act”, H.R. 4549, the “Treating Small Airports with Fairness Act of 2016”, H.R. 4785, the “DHS SAVE Act”, and H.R. 4482, the “Southwest Border Security Threat Assessment Act of 2016.”

It is no secret that when it comes to H.R. 4820, I have serious concerns about the Committee advancing it at this time. Mr. Chairman, I wrote to you on March 17th to ask that consideration of this legislation be postponed until after the Committee has had the benefit of receiving public testimony from the Director of the Department’s new countering violent extremism office—the Office of Community Partnerships.

I ask unanimous consent that my letter and the Chairman's response, dated March 21st, be submitted into the record.

The Committee has never heard testimony from this office, which was established in September 2015, about its programs and what role, if any, it has or wants with respect to identifying and collecting public testimonials from terrorists and others who repudiate violent extremism after embracing it. We do know, however, from the informal technical assistance furnished by the Department, that the legislation is not necessary.

Further, we know that it could have a negative impact on DHS' efforts at fostering community partnership, if communities believe that this information is being obtained from informants, intelligence gathering, or surveillance.

Unfortunately, the response letter I received makes broad assertions about the degree to which Mr. Fleishmann's bill incorporates DHS' comments that when viewed against the Department's technical assistance are not supportable.

Interestingly, last night, in a message that was sent to Committee staff at 9:15 p.m., the Department put an exclamation point on its original feedback. In its technical assistance to the bill, as introduced, the Department added that not only does the Department lack the staff to take on this new prescriptive activity but that, if DHS was forced to go down this road, there could be implications on future prosecutions and investigations by the DOJ and FBI.

There were two requests in my letter. The other request was that we have a public hearing with the Director of the Office of Community Partnerships. In the response letter, Mr. Chairman, you state that you are "happy to work with [me] to find the appropriate time this year for the Director to testify."

Given your strong desire to advance a bill introduced two days ago by a Member who is not on this Committee and has not participated in our Committee activities, I would think that you would want such a hearing as soon as possible, particularly in light of DHS' feedback on the bill.

Nobody in this room wants to see DHS' ability to carry out community engagement damaged. If there is a risk that the Fleishmann bill will do that, we owe it to our constituents to proceed with caution.

As such, I urge you to schedule a hearing with George Selim, the Director of the Office of Community Partnerships within DHS, as soon as possible. My staff has reached out to the Department and was assured that he would be made available to testify.

Further, I would ask you, in the interest of carrying out our duties in a thoughtful and informed manner, to postpone consideration of H.R. 4820 until our Members have had the benefit of hearing testimony and questioning the top DHS official about what the Department is doing in this space and how this bill could affect it."

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