

October 5, 2001

**STATEMENT OF RANKING MEMBER SCHAKOWSKY DURING GOVERNMENT
EFFICIENCY SUBCOMMITTEE HEARING ON
CHEMICAL AND BIOLOGICAL TERRORISM**

WASHINGTON, D.C. - Thank you, Mr. Chairman for holding this hearing after the terrible events of September 11. Through my membership on the National Security subcommittee, I have participated in a number of hearings on this subject over the last couple of years. We have heard time and again from experts with GAO, HHS, and elsewhere that we need a comprehensive threat and risk assessment for chemical and biological attacks. It has become painfully clear that our anti-terror and terrorism response networks, while vast, are in need of reform. Members of the National Security Subcommittee on both sides of the aisle, as early as October of 1999 have been echoing that point. I hope that through this hearing today we can develop a clear understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of our defenses. It is my desire that we reach an understanding that both reassures the public that they are safe, and that provides us clear guidance of the appropriate federal role in responding to chemical and biological threats.

Earlier this week, the Secretary of Health and Human Services assured the public that our country was prepared for any threat to our nation's health. I am not sure that I share his confidence. As many of our witnesses today will explain, our public health system, good as it is, would have difficulty responding to a significant biological or chemical attack-not to mention even a major flu like outbreak. The capacity of our public and private hospitals is strained each year during flu season. A disaster with 10,000 injuries that requires hospitalization would be very difficult for that system to handle. We must question whether our system could handle such a situation.

The attention we are giving today provides us with a great opportunity. If we marshal the concerns that have been raised about terrorist threats and apply those concerns wisely, we can increase the level of public safety, not just from terrorists, but from all causes.

The front line of response in most disasters is local governments and local health care providers. We see this again and again as towns and cities are struck by hurricanes, tornadoes, and even disasters like those we saw last month. The first there to tend to those in need are the local firemen, police officers, and emergency medical personnel. Any response we develop now must keep in mind that fact. Training and communications are key to disaster response, and should be a major part of our planning and investment. The majority of that investment should be made at the state and local level with an appropriate level of coordination and assistance from the federal government.

Past experiences also show that the public health system is the second line of response. Once the disaster scene is surveyed, the injured are moved to hospitals. It is often the case that the hospital capacity is reduced by the same disaster. We have taken our public health system for granted for some time now, and it has suffered as a result.

Community cooperation is the third line of response. Once the level of damage is assessed, those hardest hit will have to call upon their neighbors for assistance. As we saw after the events of September 11, everyone wants to help. We need to develop a network of community organizations, much like that under development by the Office of Emergency Preparedness at HHS. The goal is to provide every community with the preparation and resources to respond to a disaster.

These are just some of the many critical issues we will need to assess as we move forward in our efforts to improve the emergency response infrastructure in this country so we are able to address the current shortfalls and the possibility of future threats to our health and security.

Again, Mr. Chairman, I thank you for holding this hearing today. I hope this hearing contributes to moving our investments in the right direction, and I look forward to hearing from our witnesses.