

Public safety officials want better communication

July 2nd, 2002

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Associated Press

CHICAGO (AP) _ Illinois police, fire and public health officials told a congressional subcommittee meeting in Chicago on Tuesday that better communications and coordination are key in case of a nuclear, chemical or biological attack.

Rescue crews from different departments at an emergency scene often cannot share information because their communication systems are incompatible, Northbrook Fire Chief James Reardon warned.

"We cannot talk to one another. We need to be able to send data between one another," Reardon said. "We need to look at encryption for secure nets so that we can talk with our federal counterparts and our federal counterparts can talk with us."

Reardon called for the federal government to set and enforce a nationwide equipment standard for rescuers.

The hearing's focus was on how effectively the federal government is helping state and local governments prepare for an attack using so-called weapons of mass destruction. Testimony suggested Washington has done well but could do better.

Several witnesses spoke favorably of President Bush's call for a Cabinet-level Department of Homeland Security to coordinate federal defense. None spoke against it.

But Rep. Jan Schakowsky, D-Ill., said some agencies, such as the Immigration and Naturalization Service, are being rolled into the department even though much of their missions have little to do with security.

"I'm concerned in our rush to do this we don't take these things into consideration," she said. JayEtta Hecker of the General Accounting Office, the investigative arm of Congress, said lawmakers need to resist the pressure to rush the department through.

"We don't have the measure of what it is we're going for and how to measure what it is we have achieved," Hecker said.

"It's just not thought through yet," she added. Dr. John Lumpkin, the state public health director, and Dr. Pamela Diaz, Chicago's director of emergency preparedness and infectious disease control, urged the subcommittee to realize that preparedness is ongoing, not something the government can fix with a single orgy of post-Sept. 11 spending.

"Our public health system has undergone a period of neglect," Lumpkin testified. "We have to make a long-term commitment."