



COMMITTEE ON HOMELAND SECURITY

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Hearing Statement of Chairman Bennie G. Thompson (D-MS)

Securing the Homeland: Reforming DHS to Meet Today's Threats

July 15, 2021

Today the Committee is meeting to discuss how the Department of Homeland Security must refocus its mission to best respond to the most serious threats facing our Nation. This conversation comes at a timely moment as we approach the 20th anniversary of the 9/11 attacks. DHS was established in 2003 to prevent and respond to terrorist attacks within the United States. Since then, the range of threats the Department must manage has expanded well beyond foreign terrorism.

Today, DHS is also tasked with confronting the threats posed by the coronavirus, cyberattacks, violent domestic extremists, and climate change. It is critical that the Department assess the full range of threats facing the country and align its resources accordingly. Unfortunately, under President Trump the Department had a myopic focus on immigration and border security at the expense of its other missions.

DHS also suffered grave reputational and operational damage carrying out the last Administration's failed policies. Some have embraced the notion DHS must be dismantled, but that is not the answer. Instead, we must reform DHS to enhance accountability and transparency, earn Americans' trust, and improve workforce morale.

Earlier this month, I introduced the DHS Reform Act. The bill seeks to ensure the Department has a strong and integrated core to secure the homeland while ensuring accountability, transparency, and protection of Americans' civil rights and civil liberties. This legislation reflects recommendations made by those who have closely examined the challenges facing DHS, including the Center for a New American Security, the Atlantic Council, and the Center for American Progress.

All three organizations identified the need for increased oversight of the Department's law enforcement operations, for example. My bill addresses that need by creating an "Associate Secretary" position to oversee such operations. Additionally, my bill seeks a greater role for both the Office of Privacy and the Office for Civil Rights and Civil Liberties to strengthen constitutional protections in DHS policies, programs, and activities. All three organizations also recognized that improving morale among the DHS workforce must be a top priority.

The DHS Reform Act authorizes several programs aimed at identifying and addressing the causes of low employee morale. We have before us today representatives from these organizations. I look forward to discussing in greater detail their recommendations for transforming DHS. As the Department looks to refocus its operations to address emerging threats and longstanding challenges, the Committee on Homeland Security stands ready to assist.

Unfortunately, the Committee lacks jurisdiction to deliver a full DHS authorization bill or to advance legislation that reflects its oversight findings beyond a few narrowly tailored areas. Today, over 90 committees and subcommittees have jurisdiction over part of DHS, and no single Committee is involved in all measures relevant to the Department. I am working to change that as I engage with House

Leadership and other Committees. Fixing jurisdiction over DHS is one of the only recommendations of the 9/11 Commission that has yet to be resolved.

This issue has hobbled both the Committee and the Department for the last 15 years – it is long past time for it to be addressed. For DHS to be successful in carrying out its wide-ranging missions, it needs to have the confidence of the American people and its partners in the homeland security enterprise. I look forward to discussing with the witnesses and the Members today how we can reform DHS to do just that.

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