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Opening Statement

Chairman Stephen F. Lynch

Hearing on “U.S. Biodefense, Preparedness, and Implications of Antimicrobial Resistance for National Security”

Subcommittee on National Security

June 26, 2019

Today’s hearing will examine whether the United States is prepared to respond to various biological threats to our national security. These include natural pandemic outbreaks, such as influenza, Ebola, or diseases yet unknown—as well as biological attacks, which can be perpetrated by foreign adversaries, terrorist organizations, and other non-state actors. We will also focus on the growing threat of antimicrobial resistance, which, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, already contributes to the deaths of 23,000 Americans every year.

In the two decades since September 11, 2001, amazing developments in biotechnology – including synthetic biology, gene-editing, and genomic engineering – have led to remarkable breakthroughs in healthcare, clean energy, and sustainable nutrition. However, actors with malign intent can also exploit these same technologies to develop biological weapons or agents and deploy them across our nation and the battlefield with potentially devastating effect.

Director of National Intelligence Dan Coats underscored this risk in his 2019 Worldwide Threat Assessment, when he stated, quote: “These technologies hold great promise for advances in precision medicine, agriculture, and manufacturing, but they also introduce risks, such as the potential for adversaries to develop novel biological warfare agents, threaten food security, and enhance or degrade human performance.” A previous assessment issued by former Director of National Intelligence James Clapper identified gene-editing as a potential weapon of mass destruction, the basic ingredients of which can be bought online for as little as \$60.

Similarly, the non-partisan Government Accountability Office has also highlighted the dangers posed by naturally-occurring infectious diseases that could easily become pandemics in view of global climate change and mass human migration.

These official warnings demand our continued attention. Although we are fortunate not to have experienced a mass-casualty biological attack here in the United States since September 11th, the threat is very real. Foreign adversaries have already demonstrated an interest in developing genetic and biological weaponry. According to official reports, North Korean leader Kim Jong-un is pursuing advanced bioweapons research and production capabilities. Andrew Weber, Assistant Secretary for Nuclear, Chemical, and Biological Defense Programs under President Obama, recently commented: “North Korea is

far more likely to use biological weapons than nuclear ones. The program is advanced, underestimated, and highly lethal.”

Terrorist organizations and other non-state actors have also sought to develop and deploy biological weapons. A laptop recovered from ISIS fighters in northern Idlib, Syria in 2014 reportedly contained a 19-page document with instructions on how to develop biological weapons and weaponize the bubonic plague from infected animals. It also highlighted the relative low-cost of biological weapons and their potential to inflict mass casualties.

To their credit, both Democratic and Republican Administrations have taken important steps to strengthen our national biodefense. Most recently, in September 2018, the Trump Administration released the National Biodefense Strategy in compliance with a congressional directive included in the Fiscal Year 2017 National Defense Authorization Act. The President has also established a multi-agency biodefense committee to be chaired by the Secretary of Health and Human Services.

Congress has also sought to enhance our national biodefense and preparedness. Earlier this month, the House passed bipartisan legislation that will reauthorize critical funds for bioterrorism and pandemic preparedness, including \$7.1 billion for the Bioshield Special Reserve Fund for the development of biothreat medical countermeasures. The bill, which the President signed this week, also includes \$685 million in annual grant funding to states and localities through 2023 to assist them in responding to infectious diseases, biological events, and other public health threats.

Nevertheless, key gaps remain. As reported by GAO, our national biodefense framework is still “fragmented” and lacks coordination among multiple agencies. Moreover, GAO has identified “persistent challenges” facing two primary biosurveillance programs operated by the Department of Homeland Security to detect and monitor biological threats. Both the BioWatch Program and National Biosurveillance Integration Center have been hampered by technical performance deficiencies and the absence of clearly-stated missions.

Our biodefense efforts must also adapt to the emergence of new biological threats, including deadly antimicrobial-resistant diseases that render existing antibiotic, antifungal, or antiviral medications virtually useless. According to an April 2019 *New York Times* report, the spread of a resistant fungus known as *Candida auris* [*can-did-ah or-is*] has led the CDC to designate it as a serious global health threat. The CDC has already documented nearly 700 cases of this life-threatening infection in the United States. American servicemembers in Iraq and Afghanistan have also contracted drug-resistant, superbug infections, threatening overall troop readiness and morale.

Robust and continued congressional oversight will be essential to enhancing our national biodefense going forward. To this end, I look forward to discussing these and other topics with today’s witnesses and I now yield to the Ranking Member of the Subcommittee, Mr. Hice of Georgia.

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