

Opening Statement – Chairman Ron DeSantis
Subcommittee on National Security
“Combating Homegrown Extremism”
Thursday, July 27, 2017

In the words of Department of Homeland Security Secretary John Kelly, the U.S. is experiencing an “unprecedented spike in homegrown terrorism.”

Currently, the FBI has open terrorism investigations in all 50 states.

As of June 2017, the U.S. government has charged 128 individuals with offenses related to ISIS over the last 3 years.

Radical Islamic extremism is the primary driver of this problem and deserves the government’s immediate attention.

In recent years the federal government has sought to combat this problem under the guise of a program called "countering violent extremism," or CVE.

Three cities were used to conduct pilot programs: Los Angeles, Boston and Minneapolis.

Minneapolis is a particularly troublesome area, as it is a major center of Islamic terrorist activity.

The region is home to the largest concentration of Somali refugees and is the epicenter for domestic radicalization.

From 2007 to 2015, over 20 Somali-Americans are known to have left Minnesota to join the al-Shabaab terrorist organization in Somalia.

Over the last three years, federal prosecutors have charged 13 individuals from Minnesota for connections to the Islamic State.

Minnesota is second only to New York, which has four times as many residents, in number of ISIS terrorists charged.

The terrorist problem in Minnesota led former U.S. Senator Norm Coleman to warn the state is in danger of becoming “the Land of 10,000 Terrorists.”

I visited Minneapolis in December of last year to meet with federal and local law enforcement and community groups. The area truly is ground zero for terrorist recruitment.

I invited Richard Thornton, the FBI’s Special Agent in Charge of the Minneapolis Division, testify today about the problems our country is facing there.

Instead, the Bureau has sent Assistant Director Kerry Sleeper from Headquarters with the expectation that he can speak to Thornton’s specific experience and interactions in Minneapolis.

I look forward to hearing specifics about FBI’s efforts in Minneapolis so the Committee can evaluate the effectiveness of the CVE approach.

Our law enforcement and intelligence community have their hands full with preventing radicalization and interdicting terrorists before they commit heinous acts in the name of religion.

The Department of Homeland Security leads the governments Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) efforts.

CVE refers to “proactive actions to counter efforts by extremists to recruit, radicalize, and mobilize followers to violence.” Currently, the Department still promotes Obama-era policies related to CVE.

Guidance developed under the Obama Administration specifically limits any intelligence or law enforcement investigative activity through CVE.

By leaving this information on the table, CVE efforts are **missing opportunities to identify and disrupt terrorist plots.**

Obama-era guidance also fails to properly identify the immediate threat of radical Islamic extremism.

The nearly 4,000 word October 2016 CVE strategy does not mention radical Islamic terrorism at all.

The Obama Administration’s CVE strategy also relied heavily on non-governmental organizations with vague and immeasurable goals.

One week before President Trump's inauguration, former DHS Secretary Jeh Johnson announced the grant recipients of \$10 million appropriated by Congress for CVE efforts.

Their selections reflect a preference for working through community-based organizations, some with questionable programs and immeasurable goals.

For example, the Obama Administration selected for funding an organization who suggested countering violent extremism through "collaborative songwriting, multimedia, and performance."

Another suggested hiring college students to make video games.

This was not a serious attempt to stop the flow of foreign fighters to ISIS.

After President Trump took office, DHS froze the \$10 million in grants, reviewed the organizations, and announced they were removing 11 Obama grant recipients and adding 6 new ones.

A Committee review of the organizations indicates a preference for law enforcement organizations over community based organizations.

Despite this positive step, some of the law enforcement organizations designated for funding have problematic agendas.

For example, the City of Houston's application relied on so-called community experts with vocally partisan and anti-Israel agendas.

The City of Denver submitted an application that prioritized an agenda unrelated to CVE, suggesting working through organizations such as Black Lives Matter.

The Committee requested the applications of all grant recipients to determine what taxpayer dollars were funding. But DHS has still not produced these applications.

The Committee requested a briefing on the rationale for the selections of the grant recipients. But DHS refused.

Today, the Subcommittee seeks to understand what this Administration's policy is for countering violent extremism.

According to DHS this policy is currently under review, and DHS has declined to share any details about this process, including when this review is supposed to be complete and which organizations are participating.

For Congress' immediate purposes, we must determine what is driving DHS's agenda: Obama-era assumptions or the President's pledge to put political correctness aside and defeat ISIS at home and abroad.

We will question witnesses on whether the FBI and DHS are properly vetting organizations and individuals who participate in the CVE program.

We will also hear from non-governmental witnesses on the role of the private sector in CVE efforts and the scope of violent extremism problem facing the United States.

I thank the witnesses for their attendance and look forward to their testimony.