



TESTIMONY OF

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“Securing our Nation from WMDs: A Review of the Department of Homeland Security's
Countering Weapons of Mass Destruction Office”

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INTRODUCTION

Chairman D’Esposito, Ranking Member Carter, and distinguished Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the invitation to testify today on the important work of the Department of Homeland Security’s (DHS or Department) Office of Health Security (OHS). I appreciate the opportunity to discuss the workforce health and safety, medical, and public health activities of the Department.

I have served as the Acting Chief Medical Officer and Acting Director of OHS since January 2023, and prior to that, as the Deputy Chief Medical Officer and Deputy Director since the establishment of OHS in July 2022. I joined DHS in 2019, after nearly 30 years of federal public service across multiple U.S. Government Agencies including the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, the U.S. Department of Agriculture, the U.S. Department of Defense, the National Security Council, and the Intelligence Community. I look forward to speaking about how DHS is strengthening our Nation’s health security through leadership and partnership, a safer and healthier DHS workforce, and optimal care for those entrusted to us.

HEALTH SECURITY AT THE FOREFRONT OF HOMELAND SECURITY

The challenges of the past five years exemplify how nearly every homeland security threat has a nexus to health security. From acts of terror to a global pandemic, surges in migration to cyberattacks directed at critical infrastructure sectors such as healthcare, natural disasters across the country to international response efforts spanning nearly every continent – DHS is at the center of it all and often operating as the Lead Federal Agency. I want to start by highlighting the work we are doing to protect our greatest asset – the extraordinary DHS workforce.

Each and every day, the over 260,000 dedicated personnel – in addition to nearly 4,000 working animals – perform remarkable duties at land, air, and sea, in disaster zones, and at the many offices that enable our frontline workforce to deliver services efficiently and effectively. This mission is both dynamic and relentless and OHS makes it a priority to protect those who protect the Nation.

The Department effectuates our mission through an integrated framework of policies, programs, standards, and practices – recognizing an intrinsic linkage between psychological, physical, and emotional health. In addition to revitalizing the DHS Safety and Health Leadership Council, the Department became an affiliate member in the National Institute of Occupational Safety and Health’s Total Worker Health Program in 2023 and continues to make significant enhancements to our workforce safety, protection, and resiliency programs.

DHS prioritizes programs focused on mental health and wellness, particularly for law enforcement personnel serving on the frontline and the nearly 60,000 veterans within the DHS workforce. We appreciate Congress’ support for legislation to advance critical psychological

readiness programs such as peer support, stigma reduction, lethal means safety, and our capabilities to understand and reduce suicides through a systematic, standardized, and data-driven approach. OHS led the revision and finalization of an updated DHS Workforce Health and Wellness Program that expands the category of health promotion activities to include mental health and new types of physical fitness. The inclusion of mental health into this new policy positions DHS as a leader across the Federal Government, offering the workforce dedicated time to address their mental wellness.

We are also exploring innovative ways to expand and standardize Employee Assistance Programs, including for our international workforce, and Dependent Care Programs such as childcare subsidy and emergency back-up care. DHS increased offerings of initiatives such as micro-workouts, mindful minutes, and Wellness Wednesdays that help employees and their family members balance work-life responsibilities and improve physical health. These programs – and many more – provide our operational Components with frontline employees greater flexibility to implement workforce health and wellness programs consistent with and aligned to their specific mission, operational requirements, and workforce needs. Healthier and supported DHS employees keep the Nation and the communities in which we live and serve, safer.

OHS works closely with diverse governmental and nongovernmental partners to promote the delivery of high-quality health care for those in our care and custody. This year, we look forward to operationalizing the DHS Child Well-Being Program. This Program will deploy licensed and experienced mental health professionals across all U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) Southwest Border Sectors to support the well-being of children in our care through trauma informed, culturally sensitive support and coordination. The Program will augment existing processes that impact children without increasing time in custody and enable CBP to focus its resources on those who pose a threat to our national security, public safety, and border security.

To support medical and public health planning in the maritime mass migration environment, OHS collaborated with the U.S. Coast Guard (USCG) and Homeland Security Task Force–Southeast (HSTF-SE) to update Operation Vigilant Sentry (OVS), Annex Q for Medical, Health, and Safety for the first time in a decade. Since 2022, OHS brought together over 20 organizations – including many state and local agencies – via 18 exercises and planning workshops, culminating in the finalization and issuance of a new Annex Q in May 2023. However, our work did not stop there; OHS and HSTF-SE partners continue to collaborate in a series of validation exercises and workshops.

Alongside many partners, OHS had a significant role in coordinating domestic medical and public health activities during Operation Allies Welcome (OAW). In the months after, we found that many organizations shared DHS’s desire to improve operations, implement changes based on the experiences, and strengthen preparedness for future medical operations during global mass movement of displaced individuals. In October 2023, OHS hosted a multi-agency

workshop in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania with 40 attendees from 18 different agencies, including the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), Administration for Strategic Preparedness and Response (ASPR), Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), and state and local partners – all collaborating on ensuring that lessons learned do not become lessons lost. Like OVS, we continue this important work and are excited to plan for the next in-person workshop in Philadelphia in May 2024.

The Department also supports response efforts to mitigate the impacts of infectious diseases. OHS actively represents DHS equities in multi-lateral engagements related to global health security initiatives like the International Health Regulations, Pandemic Accord, and the North American Preparedness for Animal and Human Pandemics Initiative. In collaboration with the CDC, OHS co-leads an interagency effort to update the federal coordination framework for mass isolation and quarantine in response to an infectious diseases event.

OHS also coordinates the Department’s food, agriculture, and veterinary (FAV) defense activities. Over the past six months, OHS led the development of the first national-level risk assessment for the food and agriculture sector in support of the November 2022, National Security Memorandum (NSM) 16 on Strengthening the Security and Resilience of U.S. Food and Agriculture. This assessment was conducted in coordination with Sector Risk Management Agencies to identify high-consequence and catastrophic incidents impacting the sector’s critical infrastructure, essential workforce, and consequences of climate change. This first risk assessment also establishes an iterative cycle to evaluate high-level risks to the food and agriculture sector. In partnership with agencies such as the U.S. Department of Agriculture, we are also advancing other deliverables in NSM-16 that DHS will lead and partner on.

OHS success is achieved through partnerships. For example, some of our closest partners within DHS include the Countering Weapons of Mass Destruction Office, the Science and Technology Directorate, the Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency, FEMA, and USCG. OHS works side-by-side with DHS Components by providing the critical subject matter expertise and technical assistance on public health and medical aspects of chemical, biological, radiological, nuclear, FAV, and global health security threats – a “One-DHS-Health” model of coordination.

MATURATION OF THE OFFICE OF HEALTH SECURITY

July 2024 marks the second anniversary of OHS’s establishment. Congressional support has helped to create and sustain an innovative organization that recognizes the interconnected nature of health and unites previously fragmented lines of effort within DHS to enable and oversee proactive and holistic health security preparedness, response, and recovery. OHS is uniquely positioned for highly specialized missions including mobilization of expertise to improve medical operations management for DHS missions and to enhance DHS’s role as a support agency for multiple Emergency Support Functions.

OHS deeply appreciates working side-by-side with our operational partners. In order to meet mission requirements at the point of delivery, OHS is building its regional footprint by forward-deploying highly specialized clinicians to all ten domestic geographic regions as defined by FEMA and ASPR. Currently, OHS has personnel rostered in regions 5, 6, and 9, with plans to further develop our regional footprint. Focusing on the nexus of public safety, medicine, and public health, these federal personnel – with qualifications in areas such as emergency medicine, trauma and critical care, medical toxicology, and infectious diseases – serve as an important technical resource for DHS operational Components and state and local, tribal, territorial, and other stakeholders.

OHS continues to make significant strides to unify and standardize the provision of health care services across the Department. For example, as part of our role in supporting the 4,000+ personnel of the DHS Emergency Medical Services (EMS) System, we reinstated the DHS EMS Training and Education Advisory Council (EMSTEAC). The EMSTEAC is the focal point for standardization of EMS-related protocols, procedures, austere medicine coursework and other training, and high-quality working dog handler medical care programs.

OHS is advancing programs that unify and integrate DHS medical and public health data systems. Ongoing development of the Medical Information eXchange (MIX), the technology backbone of a unified electronic health record program, enables proactive identification, analysis, and decision-making related to emerging health security issues within our workforce, those in our care, and the public we serve. The MIX will also serve as a fusion point for the total workforce protection mission, integrating systems like the DHS-wide Safety Data System that is currently in development.

OHS also serves as the Department’s Liaison to the Commissioned Corps of the U.S. Public Health Service. DHS counts over 640 Public Health Service Officers among its workforce serving across ten different offices and Components. These officers deliver or oversee critical healthcare, public health services, and preparedness and response activities during steady-state and crises – ashore and afloat.

Our greatest asset is our workforce. In alignment with the U.S. Government Accountability Office’s recommended best practices¹, OHS continues to implement enduring employee engagement programs such as monthly pulse surveys, a Culture Working Group and Champions Program, and continuous quality improvement to ensure we recruit and retain a world-class workforce that delivers high-quality, efficient, and effective programming, policy, and operational initiatives. The 2023 Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey and our internal programming indicates that OHS has consistently high morale and employees believe their work is impactful, meaningful, and contributes to the common good. I am proud to lead such a talented workforce of dedicated civilians and uniformed personnel that consistently meets the highest standards of public service.

¹ Government Reorganization: Key Questions to Assess Agency Reform Efforts (GAO-18-427).

The programs and initiatives highlighted today represent only a portion of the work that OHS does as the principal medical, workforce health and safety, and public health authority for DHS. The President's Budget requests \$57.7 million in Fiscal Year 2025 funds to support 76 federal staff and the critical programs they operationalize. We look forward to working with Congress to secure the necessary resources that enables OHS to strengthen health security, advance our mission, and provide the appropriate oversight and operational expertise to ensure high-quality health programs for our workforce and those in our care.

CONCLUSION

Chairman D'Esposito, Ranking Member Carter, and distinguished Members of the Subcommittee, thank you again for holding today's hearing and for the opportunity to discuss OHS. Your ongoing support for the Department's workforce resilience, public health, medical, and occupational safety, and health programs ensures that the Department is prepared and well positioned for a proactive and agile response to an evolving health security landscape. Thank you for considering the legislative proposal to authorize OHS, which will codify and solidify those authorities, positions, and responsibilities aligned under OHS.

I look forward to your questions.