

Statement of Senator Susan M. Collins

**“The Role of Local Law Enforcement in
Countering Violent Islamist Extremism”**

Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs
October 30, 2007

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The rising threat of homegrown terrorism magnifies the importance of local law enforcement in our efforts to combat terrorism. While some terrorists are foreign nationals crossing borders to operate as part of international networks, others may be native-born or naturalized Americans radicalized into a cult of violent extremism, perhaps in prison or via a Web site advocating violence.

As recent domestic plots against Fort Dix and the JFK International Airport demonstrate, local law-enforcement officers are often our first line of

defense against such terrorist threats. Whether local officers are patrolling, reacting to a dispatcher's call, investigating the link between a stolen car and a driver's forged identification, or conducting community outreach, their actions can help to disrupt terrorists' planned attacks within the United States. These officers are often present at the first encounter with radical elements in their communities.

For example, questions posed during a simple traffic stop can be a source of information about a subject's whereabouts, associates, and activities – all potentially valuable information for preventing terrorism. You may recall that four of the 9/11 hijackers – including the one who hijacked United Airlines Flight 93 – had earlier been pulled over and ticketed for speeding. Each of them had violated U.S.

immigration laws, but the state and local officers who stopped them were not aware of that.

If standard procedure had included checks for such infractions and if we had set up an effective system to get data to these front-line officers, part of the 9/11 plot might have been disrupted. And those discoveries might have led officials to the other hijackers, possibly preventing the attacks that killed nearly 3,000 people.

Surveilling or photographing public buildings, smuggling drugs or cash, buying precursor materials for bombs, making violent statements or threats – checking on any of these behaviors can turn a routine local policing incident into a chapter in the broader fight against terrorism. Alert officers sensitized to the potentially sinister implications of

these episodes are powerful weapons in our homeland-security arsenal.

Local police are also well positioned to understand the roots of violent extremist behavior in the ethnic, racial, or religious communities in their towns and cities – and to reach out to those communities in a cooperative and respectful spirit. Each of the departments represented here has worked on understanding the process of radicalization, on distinguishing between the law-abiding majority and the violent minority within our society, and on avoiding attitudes or tactics that can alienate local populations and reduce their willingness to report suspicious events or cooperate in police investigations.

With wider awareness of threats, more extensive

coordination, and better information sharing, the nation's local law-enforcement officers can play a stronger, more collaborative role in our counterterrorism partnership.

Today we will learn more about the initiatives of the New York City, Los Angeles, Kansas City, and Miami-Dade police departments to combat the threat of radicalization and domestic terrorism. For example, New York City's study of the radicalization process, based on foreign and domestic case studies, offers a notable framework for analyzing and intervening in this lethal process. The work in Los Angeles on creating a fusion center and developing a community mapping project may provide examples of best practices that can be extended elsewhere.

I look forward to deepening the Committee's

understanding of how local police departments have organized themselves for counterterrorism work, how they develop and use personnel and programs to achieve their objectives, how they interact and coordinate with the FBI, the Department of Homeland Security, and other federal agencies. They can also help us identify and disseminate best practices and lessons learned and ensure that our sharing of information and analysis provides effective, actionable leads.

While our witnesses today represent major cities, we must remember that terrorists, whether foreign or home-grown, can also plan, train, buy supplies, assemble bombs, or carry out attacks in small towns or rural areas. We must ensure that officers in those smaller departments benefit from skills and knowledge that can be usefully applied in

their communities, and that our federal assistance is delivered in ways that provide the greatest support for all local law- enforcement efforts.

I welcome our two panels of witnesses and look forward to an interesting and productive discussion.

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