

SUBCOMMITTEE ON NATIONAL SECURITY, EMERGING THREATS,
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Statement of Rep. Christopher Shays March 16, 2004

After a series of vague warnings and alarms, the utility of the Homeland Security Advisory System (HSAS) is being questioned by state and local officials, first responders, and the public. Even Department of Homeland Security (DHS) Secretary Tom Ridge recently acknowledged the need to refine the five-color scheme that seems to be losing both its credibility and its audience.

Seeing no difference between a perpetually “elevated” state of risk – Code Yellow – and a “high” risk of terrorism at Code Orange, Americans risk becoming color blind to the signals that are supposed to prompt public awareness and action.

Since inception of the alert system two years ago, the threat level has been raised and lowered five times, flashing between yellow and orange whenever the volume of intelligence on al Qaeda went up or down. But the lack of specificity as to the time, place or nature of the perceived threats provided no basis upon which to calibrate appropriate public or private responses. As a result, governments and critical industries broadly increased security measures and incurred substantial costs. At the same time, exhortations to carry on as usual in the name of economic normalcy dulled any sense of urgency in the public at large.

The Homeland Security Act charges the Undersecretary for Infrastructure Protection to administer the HSAS and to provide “*specific* warning information, and advice about appropriate protective measures and countermeasures” to the public. The current alert system does not yet appear to meet the statutory requirements for specific information or specific advice. Whether due to an excess of caution about intelligence sources, or a reluctance to ask for changed public behaviors and sacrifices, the codes and warnings in use today may be a better barometer of political realities than public safety risks.

When a blizzard or hurricane is forecast, the public is not advised to be brave for America and stay in the eye of the storm. But when the threat of terrorism is “elevated,” citizens are advised to go about their lives as if no real peril approached. We need to make terrorism alerts at least as targeted and accurate as storm projections.

This week, the Select Committee on Homeland Security will consider legislation to improve federal preparedness grants. A section of that bill directs the DHS Secretary to revise the alert system to include with each warning more specific designations of regions or economic sectors at risk. But other refinements could also add to the immediacy and utility of any publicly disseminated terrorism threat codes.

So we asked our witnesses to discuss the principles of effective risk communication that should guide public alerts and warnings and to suggest how to improve the Homeland Security Advisory System. We appreciate their being here today and we look forward to their testimony.