

## **Preventing Bioterrorism (Times of Trenton)**

**March 12, 2009 By U.S. Rep. Rush Holt**

Last year, the Commission on the Prevention of Weapons of Mass Destruction Proliferation and Terrorism -- itself an outgrowth of the 9/11 Commission and its recommendations -- issued its report. It used alarming language to prod our government to act. It affirmed something that was demonstrated with the deadly anthrax attacks: Terrorists will likely use WMD attacks on America that feature biological weapons. The question now is: Have we implemented "lessons learned" from these attacks that took place in the fall of 2001, which caused such havoc here in New Jersey and across the nation?

I agree with the commission's assertion that "only by elevating the priority of preventing bioterrorism will it be possible to substantially improve U.S. and global biosecurity." To that end, the commission made a number of recommendations for improving biosecurity here at home, including the more thorough and persistent monitoring of personnel working at high-containment laboratories (i.e., those who work with dangerous pathogens) and the designation of a single federal agency for tracking the number of such labs in the United States.

I support those and other measures, but I do not believe Congress and the administration can craft an effective biosecurity program for our country unless and until we take the time to investigate thoroughly the only major (and still unsolved, according to many) bioterror attack on our country to date.

Last week, I reintroduced the Anthrax Attacks Investigation Act, to examine and to report on how the attacks occurred and how we can best prevent similar episodes in the future.

Readers may wonder why the commission did not address the 2001 anthrax attacks in detail in its report. The answer is that examining those attacks was not an explicit mandate of the WMD Commission. This is in contrast to the 9/11 Commission, which was specifically charged with looking at how the Sept. 11, 2001 attacks happened, why the federal government failed to prevent the attacks, and what remedial measures are necessary to prevent a similar catastrophe in the future.

A thorough investigation into the federal government's response to the first modern bioterror

attack on our soil is absolutely essential if we are to ensure that we have learned the right lessons from that episode to implement countermeasures and changes in policy that are directly tied to those "lessons learned" -- something that The Times of Trenton repeatedly has pointed out in its frequent coverage of this tragedy.

While many of the WMD Commission's recommendations for improving biosecurity look sound on the surface, none of their specific action proposals are based on a detailed examination of how the 2001 anthrax attacks occurred. More than seven years after the attacks, many critical questions remain unanswered. Chief among them is why the Federal Bureau of Investigation's (FBI) "Amerithrax" investigation focused for so long on the wrong suspect.

The FBI's performance in the wake of the attacks has left me and many other Americans wondering whether the Bureau is truly equipped to handle bioterrorism. Deterring such attacks in the future depends in part on at least the expectation of swift and certain detection and punishment.

Neither happened in the case of the 2001 anthrax attacks. We need to know why the first attack succeeded and why the perpetrator or perpetrators escaped justice.

Just as the 9/11 Commission looked not only at the attacks of that morning, but also at recommended changes in the structure of government agencies, screening methods and even congressional oversight, so should an anthrax commission look at the specific crime, but also at measures for prevention, detection and investigation of any future bioterrorism.

An anthrax attack investigation would help address these kinds of policy questions in a level of detail that the WMD Commission could not.