

Statement by Congresswoman Betty McCollum (MN04)
Committee on Oversight and Government Reform
The Lack of Hospital Emergency Surge Capacity
May 7, 2008

Mr. Chairman, the report conducted by the Committee highlights the serious challenges confronting hospital emergency rooms. Crowding is a serious problem. The American College of Emergency Physicians released a report last month that addresses the crowding issue. Their report asks what causes crowding and responds:

“Over the years, the reasons for crowding have included seasonal illnesses and visits by the poor and uninsured who have nowhere else to turn except the “safety net” provided by emergency departments.”

This country can continue to expand the capacity of emergency rooms to serve as provider of last resort for the uninsured and the mentally ill, or the Congress can work to provide universal health care for all Americans.

The choice is ours.

Mr. Chairman, I don't know about the situation in New York, Washington, Chicago, Houston, Denver or Los Angeles – I have never visited an emergency room in any of those cities so I'll take this report's findings as accurate.

But I live in Minnesota and I need to set the record straight.

First, the report inaccurately states that Minneapolis is hosting the 2008 Republican Convention. The convention will take place in Saint Paul, Minnesota – in my congressional district – with Minneapolis accommodating many of the visitors. This distinction is important, especially for the Saint Paul officials, first responders, and healthcare professionals involved in preparing to meet the needs of 40,000 visitors – including the President of the United States and Republican nominee for President.

Second, the report examines Hennepin County Medical Center which is an excellent hospital and level 1 trauma center located in Minneapolis. In the event of an emergency at the Republican National Convention Regions Hospital in Saint Paul, an excellent facility, will be primarily responsible, with the hospital examined in the report providing support.

What concerns me about this report is it examines Minneapolis solely because of the presence of the national convention yet it evaluates emergency room capacity on a random day – March 25, 2008.

During the four days in September when Republicans gather in Saint Paul, there will be significant additional resources available to ensure a safe, enjoyable convention. There will also be an emergency plan and considerable assets in place to respond to any unforeseen event.

The Department of Homeland Security designated the national party conventions “national special security events” and this Congress appropriated \$50 million to each host city to ensure coordination is seamless between the Homeland Security, the Secret Service and local and state law enforcement and first responders.

Finally, while I fully understand the use of the Madrid terrorist attack as the standard for assessing casualty preparedness, real American tragedies like the Oklahoma City bombing, Hurricane Katrina, or the Virginia Tech shooting could also have been used as models.

In the Twin Cities, we don’t need to investigate emergency room capacity using a telephone survey, our first responders were forced to respond to an emergency in real time.

Only nine months ago, on August 1, 2007 at 6:05 p.m. during rush hour the eight lanes of traffic on the Interstate 35W bridge collapsed into the Mississippi River. That night 13 people died and more than 110 patients required emergency medical attention.

The bridge collapsed due to structural failure, it could just as easily been the result of a terrorist attack. This disaster tested the very hospital in this Committee’s report. Hennepin County Medical Center and hospitals from the entire Twin Cities metropolitan area responded heroically, professionally, and efficiently. Their response was not a simulation or a blind phone survey – it was real and people are alive because of that response.

Mr. Chairman, I have letters statements from Hennepin County Medical Center, Regions Hospital, Saint Paul’s Chief of Police, and the Minnesota Hospital Association that I would like to enter into the hearing record in response to the Committee’s report.

Secretary Chertoff, when Saint Paul, Minnesota hosts the Republican National Convention in early September will there be adequate security planning and resources in place to ensure a safe convention for our visitors and for my constituents?

And, during the Republican Convention, will there be an emergency plan in place for coordination between first responders and emergency medical personnel at Regions Hospital, St. Joseph’s Hospital, United Hospital, and Children’s Hospitals – facilities which are all located within one mile of the convention site?