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Press Release

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DHS, MBTA TO BEGIN SERIES OF TESTS FOR RAPID BIOLOGICAL RESPONSE SENSORS

BOSTON, MA —The Department of Homeland Security (DHS) is working with the Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority (MBTA) to test a system of newly developed biological detection sensors at MBTA stations in Cambridge and Somerville this summer. The effort, to detect and minimize any impacts from an attack or accident involving hazardous biological materials in a mass transportation system, is being coordinated with the Massachusetts Department of Public Health, the Cambridge Public Health Department, and the Somerville Health Department, with support from the Massachusetts Emergency Management Agency.

“Mass transportation systems, with their open access, can be vulnerable to hazardous materials that could rapidly spread throughout the system and endanger hundreds of thousands of lives,” said Dr. Anne Hultgren, acting branch chief of DHS Science and Technology Directorate (S&T) Chemical and Biological Research and Development. “A rapid alert from a detection system can locate and identify these materials and provide for immediate and appropriate response to protect people and contain the hazard.”

DHS S&T has developed a series of sensors that can rapidly detect biological material, and has installed these sensors in three MBTA stations (Davis, Harvard, and Porter). In order to be sure that these safety systems are effective, several tests will be conducted using a harmless killed bacterium that is non-infectious and is approved as a food supplement. These tests will begin on August 29, 2012 when the MBTA stations are closed to the public, and will continue periodically over the next year. Signs will be posted in the MBTA stations one day before each scheduled test. While these systems are evaluated, Massachusetts public health officials will work closely with DHS and the MBTA to monitor the results.

“This detection system will be one of the first such systems installed in the country, and, if it proves to be effective, could serve as a model for other mass transportation venues throughout the nation and the world. Closing this vulnerability to our transportation infrastructure will greatly advance our preparedness and strength against possible incidents,” said MBTA Transit Police Chief Paul MacMillan.

An Environmental Assessment of the planned tests found no significant impact on human health or the surrounding environment from the use of the testing material. In addition, public comment solicited after posting of the draft assessment did not reveal any concerns with the test plan. The final Environmental Assessment and the Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI) are available at <http://www.dhs.gov/nepa>. Questions regarding testing should be submitted to: MBTATest@hq.dhs.gov.

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