



The Heritage Foundation Executive Memorandum

No. 852

January 28, 2003

SECURING THE HOMELAND BEGINS AT HOME

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The creation of the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) will not reduce the crucial role of state and local government in providing homeland security. Local agencies are most likely to respond first in a crisis. However, with the recent focus on federal efforts for the new DHS, many of the needs of state and local communities have been neglected. More can and must be done to ensure that their homeland security needs are met. Specifically, communities need a streamlined funding process, increased information sharing, and improved communication with DHS in order to protect Americans from the threat of terrorism.

Cities and counties are at the forefront of national homeland security efforts. For example, the approximately 17,000 state and local police departments may be the first to identify evidence of a possible terrorist threat. State and local health care communities will likely be the first to recognize the symptoms of a chemical or biological attack. Local fire, Emergency Medical Service (EMS), and police departments will nearly always arrive first at the scene of a terrorist attack. The September 11, 2001, attack on the Pentagon demonstrated this clearly: The local Arlington County fire department managed the response through the early days.

Progress Made. All the states have improved their preparedness since then, but action plans and preparedness levels vary greatly. There can be no cookie-cutter solution to their needs; however, as nearly every county across America may face similar homeland security concerns and needs, it will

be important to coordinate and ensure interoperability among the states and with the federal government.

Many states and cities have already undertaken bold initiatives to improve

public safety and preparedness. Governors and mayors, as well as law enforcement officials and emergency workers, have embarked on partnerships with the private sector and other metro-area communities to conduct training exercises and vulnerability assessments, and to coordinate procurement. Several communities have created health surveillance networks to increase communication among hospitals and emergency workers on symptoms or indications of a chemical

or biological attack. Every state has appointed a homeland security director, and this has helped to begin developing a much-needed chain of command and coordination for preparedness issues. Finally, many states and communities have modified and adjusted their alert and warning systems to communicate more closely with the federal government's Homeland Security Advisory System. Out-

Produced by the
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Institute for International Studies

Published by
The Heritage Foundation
214 Massachusetts Ave., NE
Washington, D.C.
20002-4999
(202) 546-4400
<http://www.heritage.org>



This paper, in its entirety, can be
found at: [www.heritage.org/
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standing examples such as these can contribute to development of a set of “best practices” that can be adopted by other communities.

Progress Remaining. Perhaps most notable among unmet needs is funding, as unplanned spending for homeland security resulting from 9/11 exacerbated budget shortfalls. Many communities estimate their budget gaps at \$8 million to \$12 million. The federal government has a responsibility to assist states and cities in providing for homeland security. They, in turn, must also make homeland security a budget priority.

Communication between local, state, and federal authorities, as well as the private sector, is vital. The DHS will include an Office for State and Local Government Coordination in the Office of the Secretary to coordinate DHS policy related to state and local programs, assess state and local resources, and manage communication between DHS and these agencies. The Department’s authorizing bill, however, provides no guidance on how the Office should conduct these responsibilities. Merely establishing an office in Washington that is required to answer calls from state and local officials would be insufficient. To be fully effective, the office must have a presence outside of Washington, where it can closely interact with governors and mayors.

To ensure that state and local homeland security needs are met, DHS Secretary Tom Ridge should:

- **Create a streamlined grant process for all homeland security efforts at DHS.** Homeland security grants should be tied to standards and “best practice” models and take into account an accurate assessment of threat, risk, and vulnerability. This would allow communities to address their security needs based on performance standards, not government standards. Most grant money should be given to states to distribute among their communities, with some direct funding going to major cities or metropolitan areas. The Office of Domestic Preparedness is responsible for providing preparedness grants but is poorly situated at DHS to fill this role. It must be moved out of the Border and Transportation Security Directorate and into the Office of State and Local Government Coordination,

which will have a firmer understanding of the states’ needs.

- **Increase information sharing.** Designated state and local law enforcement officials should be cleared to receive classified intelligence information about terrorist threats. An intelligence fusion center should be created in the DHS to ensure timely and accurate dissemination of information on potential terrorist activity.
- **Create regional political liaison offices.** DHS will inherit a variety of field offices from many of the 22 federal agencies it is absorbing. Their functions would be bolstered by the appointment of a highly visible political appointee who would represent the DHS Secretary in a given geographic region and report to him through the Office of State and Local Government Coordination. This person should be the primary contact for officials in the region seeking advice or voicing concerns. Similarly, regional liaison officers should be the primary link for transmitting federal objectives and priorities to states and localities.
- **Establish operations centers** from which the federal response to a local incident would be communicated in coordinated, interagency manner by the regional liaison officer. The regional offices should focus on managing DHS’s relationship with state and local governments and on providing them the resources they need. They should not have operational authority over the existing regional federal offices, which fulfill specific federal missions and should continue to answer to the appropriate Undersecretary.

Conclusion. Success in securing the homeland cannot be ensured by federal agencies in Washington alone. Secretary Ridge must forge a close partnership with state and local governments. Among his priorities should be to improve the DHS’s grant program, ensure that local officials have access to crucial information, and establish a regional political presence to make certain the lines of communication are always open.

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