

Executive Memorandum

No. 971
June 3, 2005



Published by The Heritage Foundation

Beyond Duct Tape: The Federal Government's Role in Public Preparedness

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In the 1950s, the federal government launched a “duck and cover” campaign to instruct Americans on how to respond to a nuclear attack. The effort was more symbol than substance. The Department of Homeland Security’s current approach to enhancing public preparedness and preparing individual citizens to respond to the threat of terrorism has similar troubles. Instead of trying to run an ineffective advertising campaign from Washington, the DHS needs to refocus its programs to empower state and local governments.

Preparedness 101. One indisputable fact should be the foundation of any public preparedness program: America does not have a culture of preparedness. There are simple measures that, if undertaken by individuals and communities, could lessen the chance of a successful terrorist attack and limit the threat to people and property in the event of another September 11. Most Americans are oblivious to them. Experience with previous attempts to promote civil defense and preparedness for natural disasters shows that no program run by the federal government can efficiently and effectively encourage Americans to take these initiatives.

The reason why a federal program will fail is simple. Research by emergency preparedness experts shows that individuals prepare for natural or man-made (technological) disasters only if they have

some experience that makes them believe such disasters might actually affect them. Thus, people in Oklahoma take the threat of tornados seriously, and people in Florida prepare for hurricane season. Yet as the event recedes in memory, preparedness levels decline. For example, in California, as time between major earthquakes lengthens, preparedness levels

drop off commensurately. Given that most Americans believe that the odds that they or their property will ever be the target of a terrorist attack are small, any campaign to improve readiness based on the threat of terrorism will fail. Trying to change their minds with speeches, pamphlets, or ad campaigns is a waste of time and effort.

On the other hand, Americans can be convinced to take basic preparedness measures if such measures are tied to threats that they perceive are real, such as crime, floods, and forest fires. Since many community public safety measures and basic disaster response activities are useful in many kinds of situations—often called all-hazards response—

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- One fact is indisputable: America does not have a culture of preparedness.
 - The DHS can best help state and local communities by helping them to establish training programs to teach state and local leaders how to build effective local preparedness programs.
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This paper, in its entirety, can be found at:
www.heritage.org/research/homelanddefense/em971.cfm

Produced by the Kathryn and Shelby Cullom Davis
Institute for International Studies

Published by The Heritage Foundation
214 Massachusetts Avenue, NE
Washington, DC 20002-4999
(202) 546-4400 • heritage.org

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these programs can be constructed to create a culture of preparedness.

However, they will succeed only if they are community-based. Every community is unique. Local preparedness planning must account for local conditions of culture, geography, language, infrastructure, politics, and numerous other factors. In fact, research suggests that programs are much more effective when members of the community are engaged in preparedness planning, sharing their concerns and ideas with emergency officials.

The Federal Government's Role. The federal government does not have a large role to play in advancing public preparedness against terrorism. This mission is largely, and rightly, the responsibility of state and local governments. The federal government can get a much bigger bang for its security buck by investing federal dollars in appropriate federal missions, like finding and stopping terrorists in the first place.

This is not to say, however, that Washington should not take certain measures. Appropriate steps should include:

- **Establishing an Undersecretary for Protection and Preparedness.** While the DHS role in public preparedness should not be large, it should be effective and well-integrated with all the other DHS preparedness, mitigation, and outreach activities. This can best be done by consolidating all of these tasks under one place in the department, as recommended in "DHS 2.0: Rethinking the Department of Homeland Security," a joint report by The Heritage Foundation and the Center for Strategic and International Studies.
- **Deemphasizing national preparedness programs.** Initiatives like Ready.gov and National Preparedness Month are redundant with programs run by the American Red Cross and will never be as effective programs run by communities with the participation and leadership of local citizens.
- **Restructuring the Homeland Security Advisory System (HSAS).** The HSAS color-coded

alerts were not designed as a risk communication system for the public, but that is how the program is widely perceived. Americans do not understand or trust the system. "DHS 2.0" recommends replacing it with a simple and clear system of watches and warnings that tells Americans what we can do and when we can do it and then lets them decide how to live their lives.

- **Working on disaster response communications.** The most vital role that the federal government can play in enhancing the public response to a terrorist attack is ensuring that its communications are understandable, credible, and actionable. The federal response to the anthrax attacks demonstrates that much needs to be done in this area. Washington cannot afford to wait until a disaster happens before beginning to work on how to communicate effectively with the American people. The DHS's Federal Emergency Management Agency should be the national leader in this effort.
- **Training the trainer.** The DHS can help state and local communities develop a culture of preparedness by helping them to establish training programs for state and local leaders.

Conclusion. Public preparedness programs run by Washington bureaucrats will not make Americans safer. However, they will waste tax dollars and divert the DHS from tasks that would make a difference. Rather than symbolic programs that create the illusion of caring, the DHS needs to take steps that will actually work. These programs must be built on the recognition that the only effective and sustainable efforts will be those developed by people in their own communities. That should come as no surprise. As with many other homeland security missions, applying—rather than trying to circumvent—the principles of federalism usually produces the best results.

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