

Executive Memorandum

No. 984
October 5, 2005



Published by The Heritage Foundation

Katrina's Forgotten Responders: State Defense Forces Play a Vital Role

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U.S. law allows states to raise and maintain state defense forces (SDF). As the emergency response to Hurricane Katrina demonstrated, these groups can be an important supplement to the National Guard, particularly during catastrophic disasters. When trained, disciplined, and well organized, local responders are essential for providing immediate aid and security. Congress and the Bush Administration should encourage states to better organize, train, and equip these volunteer units.

Authorized Under Law. The U.S. Constitution and United States Code Title 32, Section 309, authorize state defense forces. An SDF is under the command of the governor and reports to the state's Adjutant General. The state's constitution and laws prescribe the SDF's duties and responsibilities. These forces are state troops and are not funded by the federal government. In order to use armories, train on military installations, and receive in-kind support, states have to comply with federal standards for the National Guard in matters of accession, training, uniforms, and discipline. SDF personnel receive no pay for training but may be paid for active duty under state control.

A Historic Force. Several states formed SDF units during World War I to replace their National Guard, which had been called into federal active

duty. About 100,000 armed SDF personnel guarded key infrastructure and secured the coastlines and land frontiers. During World War II, about 200,000 state guardsmen, with War Department support, replaced the mobilized National Guard. The SDF program was revived in 1980 during the Cold War under the premise that SDF personnel would have to replace the National

Guard on the home front if troops were mobilized to fight in Europe. Currently, 23 states maintain state defense forces of some kind, for a nationwide total of about 14,000 personnel.

In the Wake of Disaster. So far, several thousand SDF personnel from at least eight states have participated in the response to Hurricane Katrina. Louisiana activated all of its SDF. About 150 of these personnel were used in the response operation in support of the Louisiana National Guard. Mississippi also activated all of its State Guard personnel, principally in support of the Army National Guard, to provide security and operate shelters. Under the direction of the Adjutant General, Alabama SDF personnel

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 - Building a stronger community response through state volunteer groups is an essential part of preparedness.
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This paper, in its entirety, can be found at:
www.heritage.org/research/homelanddefense/em984.cfm

Produced by the Kathryn and Shelbly 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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assisted in providing security and supported the operations of the Alabama National Guard.

Although most SDF personnel were used in their own states, some were also deployed to the Gulf Coast. The Texas State Guard activated over 1,000 members on paid active duty. Medical and military police units received evacuees at Kelly Air Force Base and supported operations at the Houston Astrodome and at shelters in four other locations within Texas. Georgia SDF personnel were activated in unpaid status to process evacuees through Dobbins Air Reserve Base and to provide medical and administrative support and security for shelters. Virginia used about 100 unpaid volunteers as part of the Katrina response operation. This allowed additional members of the Virginia National Guard to deploy to the Gulf Coast. Members of the Virginia defense force assisted in the deployment of National Guard units and provided security for armories. The Maryland defense force sent an 81-person medical team to Louisiana. The Tennessee State Guard was alerted on September 1 and activated 150 volunteers to secure and support shelter operations at several locations.

Force for the Future. Katrina demonstrated the difference between a “normal” disaster and a catastrophe. The normal response to disaster calls for a cascading response. Local community resources have the primary responsibility to respond. When their resources are overwhelmed, they seek aid from the state. In turn, when state assets are exhausted, the federal government provides assistance. This process usually takes days. By contrast, in a catastrophic disaster, state and local responders are stressed from the start. In these situations, it is vital to draw on volunteer groups to help close the support gap until the resources of the nation can be mobilized.

Although governors have great responsibility for preparedness and response in catastrophic emergencies, they have few resources other than their National Guard available to them. SDF provide a low-cost way for states to increase the resources available. However, they have received little attention. Some state Adjutants General want strong and

effective SDF under their command as part of their state military departments. Others resist having SDF, in some cases because of the additional work necessary to administer them. Historically, the Pentagon has offered little support or advice to the states. Additionally, while the Department of Homeland Security promotes volunteer participation in national preparedness and response programs, it has paid scant attention to SDF.

Neglecting SDF is a mistake. With National Guard forces being called to active duty more frequently than at any time since the Korean War, the need for SDF to provide some measure of backup support to the states should be readily apparent.

Moving Forward. SDF should be a core part of the volunteer assets available to states in time of crisis. Congress can help by establishing a legislative framework to require appropriate cooperation between the Departments of Defense and Homeland Security and the state governments on SDF matters. One bill, H.R. 3401 (the State Defense Force Improvement Act), introduced by Representatives Joe Wilson (R-GA) and Lincoln Davis (D-TN), provides that Congress recognize state defense forces as “an integral military component of the Nation’s homeland security effort” under state control and for use at the state level in accordance with state laws. It would also authorize the Pentagon and Department of Homeland Security to provide limited support for SDF at no direct cost to the federal government.

Conclusion. In considering how best to respond to disasters like Katrina, not all of the answers can be found in Washington. Building a stronger community response through volunteer groups such as state defense forces is an essential part of preparedness.

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