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Building the Right Regional Framework for Preparedness and Response

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I served as Chief of Staff to Governor Ronald Reagan in California. I'd like to approach my remarks from that viewpoint, because I think that the key element that has been least addressed in dealing with homeland security has been the first responders at the local government and state government level.

In the state of California, I had the Cabinet responsibility for the National Guard and the Office of Emergency Services. I was also Chairman of the Governor's Emergency Operations Council, which was composed of the heads of the National Guard, the Office of Emergency Services, the California Highway Patrol, and the State Department of Justice. This group operated as kind of a National Security Council at the local level on matters pertaining to state-wide emergency incidents such as we had in the 1960s and '70s: the problem of riots and disorders in some of our cities, for example, and the problem of a major fire risk. These are small potatoes, perhaps, compared with today's homeland security threats, but nevertheless kind of a microcosm of what we're now experiencing. Based on that experience, I've formed some ideas on the relationship between the Department of Homeland Security, and the federal government generally, in regard to state and local government.

In California in those days we dealt with a number of the federal agencies. We dealt with what was then known as the Office of Emergency Preparedness, which was a sub-division of the White House. We dealt with the White House itself. We dealt with the Pentagon, particularly the Military Support for Civil Authorities,

Talking Points

- State and local first responders are essential partners in the war on terrorism. When the Pentagon was attacked on 9/11, it was police, fire, and emergency services personnel from nearby counties that reacted.
- These state and local officials need to be sure that they are connected to planning at the federal level and that their input is considered.
- One way to do this is through regional directors who are the direct representatives of the Secretary of Homeland Security. They should be located close to the local officials, and they should have the authority and clout to make things happen when necessary.

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which was a very important part of the federal government's backing up local law enforcement.

I certainly agree that the Department of Homeland Security must provide coordination, but I also suggest that there is another function. That function is to provide guidance and support to local government and to provide the connectivity between the first responders and the people at the federal level in a variety of ways that I'll go into in a moment.

Essential First Responders

No activity is more representative of the responsibility that is shared by the three levels of government and the private sector than homeland security. Defending the homeland obviously is a federal responsibility. The Constitution gives the President that specific responsibility, as commander in chief, to defend the nation against external enemies. Yet at the same time, we have to recognize that the first responders, the people who will be implementing the plans, are at the local level.

Take a look at what happened on September 11, 2001, when the plane went into the Pentagon. The Pentagon building, of course, is a powerful symbol of federal authority, and yet it was local authorities that responded to that emergency. It was Arlington County supported by, through mutual aid plans, Fairfax County, Montgomery County, and a variety of other counties nearby whose police, fire, and emergency medical services responded to the Pentagon.

That gives us an example of why the local governments are so important to dealing with this problem. As I go around the country and speak at conferences of police chiefs and fire chiefs and mayors, I hear from local executives in the emergency response fields that there is some uncertainty as to both their role and the federal role. They feel that there is a lack of input in many cases, and they feel a lack of connectivity between the federal and the local governments.

Meeting the Needs of Local Officials

A great deal of work has been done in the National Capital Region, and in some ways it can be a model for the rest of the country. But I would suggest that the importance of local governments and the private sector be recognized by having a director at the

undersecretary level in the Department of Homeland Security. This official would have the responsibility for coordination between the Department of Homeland Security and state and local governments. It may be that the Undersecretary for Preparedness would have that responsibility; that's where it's currently located. But I think it's important that one agency has responsibility for the relationships between the Department of Homeland Security and the local governments and the private sector.

And that is why I would suggest that in the regional organization there be regional directors who are the direct representatives of the Secretary of the Department of Homeland Security. They should have both the authority and the clout to make things happen, and should be persons with whom local mayors, police chiefs, and fire chiefs can relate. Local officials need to know that their message will get through. They need to know that there is someone reasonably close to them geographically, but even more important, very close to them on a practical basis in terms of communication so that they have that link to the Department of Homeland Security.

I stress direct representatives of the Secretary of Homeland Security because I think this is a key element: the feeling that the local officials will have the voice that is necessary in order to have their input into plans, and also someone who can answer their questions with authority, whether it has to do with applications for grants, with exercises, with the whole gamut of the relationship between the local governments and the federal government.

The FEMA model of the regional directors has worked in the past in much lower level types of emergencies, but at the same time I think that it's important that these regional directors in fact have the authority and are recognized as the direct representatives of the Secretary. For that reason, I think it's probably a good idea that they be presidential appointments, confirmed by the Senate, but directly responsible to the Secretary of Homeland Security.

Regional Director Responsibilities

One of the concerns within the Department, I think, is that if you have presidential appointees, they will be out on their own feeling that authority out in the hustings around the country. I think it's

important that these positions be directly and totally responsible, actually nominated by and responsible to the Secretary, so there is no question that they are part of the structure and part of the command group within the Department of Homeland Security.

Their functions would be many. They would, for example, oversee the development of the regional plans. There could be a certain amount of outsourcing, but at the regional level, they would be the commanders, if you will, of those regional headquarters—not in the sense of commanding the local officials but in the sense of supporting the local officials.

They would also be responsible for seeing that there is coordination; the whole idea would be to build on existing mutual aid plans. The mutual aid plans in many of the states are very effective, as was the case with the response to the attack on the Pentagon, but it is necessary to build upon those plans and adapt them to the kinds of catastrophic events that you would have in a potential terrorist attack.

It would also involve not only the coordination of effort, the implementation of regional plans as well as local plans within cities, but also ensuring the inter-operability of organizations and particularly communications in those places. This would be done through two major things that these regional directors would have responsibility for seeing took place.

One is training, based on the agreed-upon plans that would be subject to the needs of each particular region and the peculiarities of the various localities coming together. And the second thing, which is equally important to training, is frequent and regular exercises so that these various agencies can work together. It is only through exercises that they get to know each other and get to working together. But even more important, only through exercises do you find where the glitches are and what parts of the plan reveal uncertainties that need to be solved or deficiencies that need to be corrected.

I think if you have this kind of a setup with regional directors in the way in which I've described you will have achieved something in which the local officials feel that they have a greater part, both in determining what the national plan is, and how they link to it, but also in terms of how these things are carried out. And so I would suggest that in terms of the right regional framework for preparedness and response, it is critical to establish "one-stop shopping" for local officials with authoritative regional directors who provide the link to the Secretary of Homeland Security.

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