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Two Steps Backward: Homeland Security's Presidential Policy Directive-8

Jena Baker McNeill and Matt A. Mayer

On April 8, the Obama Administration released Presidential Policy Directive-8 (PPD-8), which claims to update national preparedness policy. While the directive's emphasis on capabilities-based planning is appropriate and should be applauded, its dismissal of key national preparedness guidance and plans is puzzling. Instead of recognizing what has and has not been accomplished since the last major preparedness directive was issued, the directive reads as though the past seven years never happened.

Attempting to recreate the wheel in terms of preparedness policy is a waste of resources. The Obama Administration should instead seek to build upon prior work and act as a better integrator of nationwide efforts to prepare for catastrophic disasters.

Top-Level National Preparedness Efforts. In 2003, the Bush Administration released Homeland Security Presidential Directive-8 (HSPD-8), which established new requirements for national preparedness. HSPD-8 assigned the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) the lion's share of responsibility for organizing the federal preparedness effort.

To implement HSPD-8, DHS developed a set of 15 terrorist and natural disaster scenarios. Each scenario detailed the implications of each type of disaster for federal, state, and local jurisdictions and identified mission areas that would need to be activated if the incident occurred.

DHS then convened working groups made up of representatives from federal, state, and local governments, as well as the private and non-profit

sectors, to identify the tasks and capabilities that would be needed to effectively prevent, protect, respond to, and recover from a catastrophic event. This national process resulted in the development of the Universal Task List and the Target Capabilities List (TCL), which serve as the baseline capabilities needed from prevention to recovery. DHS also published the National Preparedness Goal.

The Capabilities Question . While DHS sought to build the TCL capabilities, it failed to ensure that the capabilities sought in the TCL were adequately linked to grants made to states and localities. In essence, DHS and Congress, because of either mismanagement or pork-barrel spending, failed to ensure that states and localities were allocated grant monies in a way that actually made measurable steps toward improving national preparedness.

As a result, \$40 billion has been allocated to states and localities across America, yet DHS is still unable to state with any degree of certainty which capabilities exist, where those capabilities exist, the level of those capabilities, and the remaining capability needs. The Government Accountability Office highlighted this problem in its March 2011 report on waste in government. It emphasized:

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(202) 546-4400 • heritage.org

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[I]f the problems regarding preparedness grant applications and capabilities are not addressed, [the Federal Emergency Management Agency] could spend billions of dollars without the ability to identify duplication of effort and prioritize the development and maintenance of the most important preparedness capabilities.¹

PPD-8. PPD-8 embraces “an integrated, all-of-Nation, capabilities-based approach to preparedness.”² Such a statement is nearly identical to HSPD-8’s approach of focusing on all-hazards, capabilities-based planning. Despite this embrace, PPD-8 fails to mention the TCL, the National Preparedness Goal, or any of the other related preparedness policies that have been adopted over the past seven years. This raises serious questions about whether the Obama Administration takes the need to reform the process seriously and whether future efforts will lead to any actual gains in preparedness.

With the federal fiscal crisis, DHS should not be allowed to allocate additional funds without any idea of how those funds improve America’s disaster preparedness.

Next Steps. DHS was created to be the lead integrator of national preparedness efforts and incorporate capabilities into a national system grounded in the principles of federalism. This system is to be capable of preventing, protecting, responding to, and recovering from attacks on the homeland.

Establishing this system in a way that spends taxpayer dollars wisely and effectively should be a top priority of the Obama Administration. The next steps should include:

- **Update current guidance.** DHS should publicize gains or gaps in current capabilities at the local, state, and federal levels. Absent an adequate understanding of what capabilities exist, it is impossible to efficiently prioritize future investments or update preparedness goals.
- **Examine cooperative agreements.** Instead of grants, Congress and DHS should consider

cooperative agreements in which the federal government and the states can sit down as equal partners and negotiate outcomes at the beginning and then direct funds to achieve desired capability outcomes without the need for yearly applications.

- **Tackle interagency issues.** One of the biggest impediments to better national preparedness is the lack of an effective interagency process for federal agencies to cooperate with one another and their partners in state and local government and the private sector. Fixing the problem will require the Administration to set clear policy guidelines and improve professional development.
- **Emphasize the catastrophic.** If the catastrophe in Japan has taught any lessons, it is that America must prepare for the unexpected with as much vigor as it prepares for the expected. Congress should appoint an independent commission to analyze the threats of a potential “Black Swan” event, identifying existing capabilities and making recommendations on how best to correct the errors made thus far and accelerate closing the gap between where the nation stands and where it needs to be. The commission should have the independence and resources to do its job quickly after a full review of the status quo.
- **Give states and localities a real voice.** The President should issue an executive order that gives states and localities a seat at the federal policy table on homeland security issues. This policy group should be kept small and within the Executive Office of the President. The group should work directly with the National Security Council and be included in appropriate interagency policy committees.

Getting Serious. The right step forward for PPD-8 is to leverage what has already been done and focus on getting measurable results. Then, if the Obama Administration is serious about getting

1. U.S. Government Accountability Office, *Opportunities to Reduce Potential Duplication in Government Programs, Save Tax Dollars, and Enhance Revenue*, March 2011, p. 118, at <http://www.gao.gov/new.items/d11318sp.pdf> (April 14, 2011).
 2. The White House, Presidential Policy Directive-8, March 30, 2011, at <http://assets.nationaljournal.com/pdf/04.08.11PreparednessPlan.pdf> (April 14, 2011).

the nation better prepared for the next disaster, it would reassess spending and focus on projects that will make Americans more prepared in accordance with its capabilities-based approach.

—*Jena Baker McNeill is Senior Policy Analyst for Homeland Security in the Douglas and Sarah Allison Center for Foreign Policy Studies, a division of the Kath-*

ryn and Shelby Cullom Davis Institute for International Studies, at The Heritage Foundation. Matt A. Mayer is a Visiting Fellow at The Heritage Foundation and President of the Buckeye Institute for Public Policy Solutions in Columbus, Ohio. He has served as Counselor to the Deputy Secretary and Acting Executive Director for the Office of Grants and Training in the U.S. Department of Homeland Security.