

29. Catastrophic Disasters

THE United States should improve its catastrophic response capabilities by strengthening the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) grant system, creating a regional structure, and drafting national standards for state volunteer defense forces.

by James Jay Carafano, Ph.D.

Recommendations

1. Complete the implementation of the DHS Second Stage Review.

After his appointment as Secretary of Homeland Security, Michael Chertoff initiated a Second Stage Review of Homeland Security's missions, resources, and organizations. The reorganization plan was released in July 2005, a month before Hurricane Katrina. The review recognized that the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) had been saddled with a number of activities over the years that are unrelated to its core function, such as handing out grants and running the U.S. Fire Administration. At the same time, the law that created the DHS dispersed the tasks of preparing for, protecting against, and mitigating natural and man-made disasters throughout the department. This ran contrary to the law's stated purpose of creating a "one-stop shop" for state and local governments and the private sector.

Secretary Chertoff's proposed consolidation of all preparedness functions under a new Undersecretary for Preparedness would lead to better management of these support activities. Once disasters strike, FEMA's job would be to take over the response effort. As a stand-alone agency in the department, it could focus consistently on its core mission of mobilizing the nation for disasters like Katrina. Secretary Chertoff also wanted to ensure that the agency is better prepared to deal with catastrophic events and correctly insisted that FEMA remain within the DHS. Taking FEMA's activities—which must be closely coordinated with preparedness measures like planning, training, and issuing grants—out of the DHS makes no sense. Secretary Chertoff's proposed reorganization would address many of the shortfalls created by placing FEMA within the DHS while preserving the advantages of having most major federal disaster-related preparedness and response activities, for both man-made and natural disasters, concentrated in one department. In the event of large-scale disasters, FEMA could be reinforced by other assets from within the DHS.

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Congress's first priority should be to support full implementation of the DHS Second Stage Review. Specifically, Congress should (1) require that preparedness activities be consolidated under an Undersecretary for Preparedness; (2) insist that FEMA be an independently operating agency focused on national response; and (3) insist that FEMA remain part of the DHS to ensure that response efforts are well integrated with all the critical homeland security missions.

2. Create DHS regional offices to coordinate preparedness activities.

The Homeland Security Act of 2002 requires the DHS to propose a regional framework, but the department has yet to announce a plan for such a framework. This organization could significantly improve coordination of the response to catastrophic disasters. Congress should (1) demand that the DHS create a regional framework with the primary aim of enhancing information sharing and other coordination among the states, the private sector, and DHS headquarters in Washington; (2) require that the regional offices be led by political appointees who have sufficient clout to gain ready access to local leaders, who ideally would include former politicians, police chiefs, and other people with some background in both homeland security issues and their geographic areas of responsibility; and (3) require that the regional organization's first priority must be to support the flow of information and coordinate training, exercises, and professional development for state and local governments and the private sector in responding to catastrophic disaster. A well-established regional framework would go a long way toward mitigating the miscues in communication and mistrust among local, state, and federal officials that were apparent during the response to Hurricane Katrina.

3. Reform the Homeland Security Grant programs. Federal dollars should be spent to make all Americans safer by building a national preparedness and response system and preparing for catastrophic disasters. Current congressional guidelines for homeland security grants work against these goals. The Patriot Act created a formula for disbursing homeland security grants, but the formulas that drive the grant process are turning homeland security initiatives into state entitlement programs, guaranteeing each state 0.75 percent of the funds available. As a result, 40 percent of funds are immediately committed, leaving only 60 percent of the state grants for discretionary allocations. Money should be distributed based on national priorities, not on a desire to give every state an equitable slice of the federal dole. Congress should reduce or eliminate the minimum allocations of grants to states in the state homeland security program.

Congress should also end the Fire Grant program. Providing equipment and hiring firemen for small-town fire departments is a local responsibility, not a federal one. Over \$2 billion has already been spent

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on this program, which essentially uses federal tax dollars to allow state and local governments to shirk their responsibility to ensure the public safety of their citizens. In addition, Congress should combine transportation and port security grants into a single program and allocate those funds to assist in information-sharing and counterterrorism activities, not buying fences and hiring gate guards.

4. Encourage states to strengthen their self-defense forces. State and local governments will always need to draw support beyond their core of professional emergency responders for a catastrophic disaster. While the National Guard is often the source of this support, it may not be enough. In addition, if the National Guard is deployed, the state must have a credible alternative. The Constitution authorizes the states to form other guards and militias. Some states have these volunteer groups, which are of varying quality and utility. These volunteer groups could be a useful backup asset for catastrophic disaster. The federal government does not need to fund state guards, but it should set national standards and provide incentives to states to address the readiness of their volunteer defense forces. Congress should (1) require the Department of Defense, in cooperation with the Department of Homeland Security, to draft national performance standards for state volunteer defense forces and (2) authorize federal departments to advise and evaluate these forces and allow state defense personnel to undertake military and homeland security training and education opportunities at the state's expense.

Facts and Figures

- FEMA has only about 2,500 full-time permanent employees and 5,000 “reserve” employees available on standby.
- The Homeland Security Act of 2002 merged over 22 federal organizations and programs into a single department. As part of this legacy, the DHS inherited at least a dozen different regional structures.
- The Homeland Security Act requires the DHS to propose a regional framework but provides no guidance on the system's purpose or implementation. It states only that “Not later than 1 year after the date of the enactment of this Act, the [DHS] Secretary shall develop and submit to Congress a plan for consolidating and co-locating—(1) any regional offices or field offices of agencies that are transferred to the Department under this Act, if such officers are located in the same municipality; and (2) portions of regional and field offices of other Federal agencies, to the extent such offices perform functions that are transferred to the Secretary under this Act.”

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■ There are only 55,000 state troopers nationwide. The major resource available to governors is members of the Army National Guard, but there are only 350,000 of them—an average of about 7,000 per state—and Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld promises only that half of them will be available to the governors during the global war on terrorism. This is adequate for routine incidents and some major emergencies, but not for catastrophic terrorist attacks.

■ The formulas that drive the grant process are turning homeland security initiatives into state entitlement programs. Current funding formulas guarantee each state 0.75 percent of the funds available. As a result, 40 percent of funds is tied up immediately, leaving only 60 percent for discretionary allocations. Since 9/11, money has been distributed more on the basis of the desire to give every state an equitable slice of the federal pie than on the basis of national priorities.

This chapter can be read online at issues2006.org/disaster.

Notes

Additional Reading

James Jay Carafano, Ph.D. and Laura Keith, “Hurricane Katrina Lessons Learned: Solid Recommendations,” Heritage Foundation *WebMemo* No. 998, February 23, 2006, at www.heritage.org/Research/HomelandDefense/wm998.cfm.

James Jay Carafano, Ph.D., and Richard Weitz, Ph.D., “The Truth About FEMA: Analysis and Proposals,” Heritage Foundation *Backgrounder* No. 1901, December 7, 2005, at www.heritage.org/Research/HomelandDefense/bg1901.cfm.

Alane Kochems, “Military Support to Civilian Authorities: An Assessment of the Response to Hurricane Katrina,” Heritage Foundation *Backgrounder* No. 1899, November 28, 2005, at www.heritage.org/Research/HomelandDefense/bg1899.cfm.

Edwin Meese III, James Jay Carafano, Ph.D., and Richard Weitz, Ph.D., “Organizing for Victory: Proposals for Building a Regional Homeland Security Structure,” Heritage Foundation *Backgrounder* No. 1817, January 21, 2005, at www.heritage.org/Research/HomelandDefense/bg1817.cfm.