

Web Memo



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Congress Questions Homeland Security Grants

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Members of Congress have raised concerns over the recently announced distribution of Urban Area Security Initiative (UASI) grants. The Department of Homeland Security (DHS) has spent over two years developing a process to allocate grants in a manner that meets national priorities. That is the way that grants should be allocated. If DHS has properly used this system in disbursing UASI funds, it should demonstrate that to Congress. Meanwhile, Congress can help ensure grants go where they are needed most by repealing legislative mandates that allocate grants without respect to risk or needs.

Homeland Security Grants 101

Grants are not entitlements. Local governments bear the primary responsibility for public safety. Federal dollars support the federal government's unique responsibilities –integrating state and local assets into a national preparedness and response system and ensuring the capacity to respond to catastrophic disasters that would overwhelm any state or local government. Grants should be used to support these missions. With that in mind, DHS developed a comprehensive approach for best spending federal tax dollars to meet federal priorities, allocating grants to address the most critical demands. DHS established national standards (for responding to terrorist attacks and natural disasters) and essential required capabilities (such as medical assets and evacuation plans) for both urban and rural areas. States and

cities are supposed to submit grant proposals based on these standards. DHS is supposed to evaluate the proposals and award grants to applicants with the highest priority requests who can most effectively spend the money. For two years, DHS has told Congress that this is how grants would be distributed.

UASI Grants Cause Concern

Last week, DHS announced the allocation of UASI grants, which go directly to major urban areas. Some congressional leaders balked when the results called for a decrease in the sums going to some of the largest urban areas, including a 40 percent cut for New York, while smaller cities that had not qualified before received grants. Addressing these concerns should be easy. If DHS faithfully followed the process it has established, then it should be able to justify its decisions to Congress in short order. If it cannot, then the system needs to be fixed—fast. It is far from clear that the billions spent on homeland security grants since 9/11 has been well spent.

This paper, in its entirety, can be found at:

<http://www.heritage.org/research/HomelandDefense/wm1110.cfm>

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The administration and Congress must work together to provide better solutions than throwing more money at the problem.

Members of Congress do not have to wait for DHS to explain its decisions to help ensure that homeland security grants are spent effectively. They can start now by eliminating legislative mandates that are turning an instrument of national security into another federal entitlement. Congress should:

- Reduce or eliminate the requirement that a minimum of .75 percent of funding for homeland security grants go to each state, which commits 40 percent of funding for state grants without respect to risks and needs; and

- Eliminate special categories of grants that direct money to special interests, such as cities, ports, and firefighters; all grants should be allocated based solely on national priorities.

Congress is right to expect and demand that DHS comes up with a process to assess, allocate, and monitor grants that is efficient, effective, and serves national priorities. Likewise, Americans are right to expect that Congress does not allow homeland security spending to become “pork barrel” funding, contributing little to national security.

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