

Collaboration is the key

Intergovernmental coalition issues homeland security policy recommendations

BY AMY C. HUGHES

Communication, coordination and collaboration were key themes at a recent meeting of the nation's principal state and local emergency responder associations. The coalition, informally named the Homeland Security Committee, serves as a national coordination group linking the Department of Homeland Security, the Department of Health and Human Services and other federal agencies with the various public safety disciplines to collaboratively address homeland security issues.

During the January meeting in Palm Beach, Florida, the interagency committee issued several policy and program recommendations that could have a significant impact on the future of homeland security. The National Emergency Management Association hosted the meeting.

Homeland security national strategies

The coalition recommended that the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) develop a national long-term strategy for homeland security to guide state and local efforts over the next five to 10 years. The group asked that Congress or Secretary Tom Ridge designate an entity to develop the strategy and ensure that state and local input is considered throughout the process.

One integral component of an effective disaster response is the ability of first responders and different levels of government to communicate through voice and data exchange. Several interoperability initiatives are underway on the federal level, but little real progress has been made. The committee members called on DHS to develop a national communications interoperability strategy, to ensure that radio communications (wireless or otherwise) are a functional tool for first responders – not a hindrance in response efforts or a liability to their safety. In drafting the strategy, the department should consider all aspects of interoperability: radio spectrum, data interoperability, equipment requirements, system redundancy, funding and collaboration with private industry.

National standards

Millions of dollars are being invested in first responder equipment through federal homeland security grants, yet there are no

national standards or certifications for Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD) equipment. A glut of companies offering new WMD products are bombarding state and local governments with advertising and offers, but due to the lack of standards and very tight deadlines to expend grant funds, governments are on their own to determine which products will benefit them the most. The coalition recommended that DHS develop national standards for first responder equipment to assist state and local buyers in determining what equipment is tested and graded for use and what companies are legitimately certified to sell it.

Intelligence information and critical infrastructure protection

Designating what is and is not critical infrastructure can be a subjective process. The current process originally developed by DHS does not provide any parameters or constraints for state and local jurisdictions in making that decision. Members of the coalition encouraged the department's Information Analysis and Infrastructure Protection Directorate to develop a single, comprehensive model or process to guide state and local jurisdictions in determining which assets are critical, and therefore warrant extra protection.

In addition, state and local officials should explore ways to strengthen the public-private sector relationship to ensure there are no gaps in prevention, preparedness or response when a disaster or act of terrorism affects a privately held asset. The committee further recommended that the directorate consider supporting state-level information centers to improve analysis and intelligence sharing among all levels of government.

The federal funding equation

The public debate continues over the distribution of federal homeland security funding. The coalition encouraged DHS to provide greater flexibility regarding the use of homeland security funding, particularly in the area of personnel. While the short deadlines for states to pass through homeland security funds to locals looks good on paper, it has unintended consequences for state and local governments in terms of making the best allocation and purchasing

decisions. The group agreed that DHS needs to refine the distribution system.

According to the coalition members, the formula used to determine funding allocations for state and local governments should provide for a baseline amount of funds per state, with additional considerations for threat, vulnerability to attack, and capability to support needs arising outside of a jurisdiction's borders. The basis for funding should also center on the required state homeland security strategy, which is intended to develop a statewide capability. Those priorities may differ from state to state, but if there is flexibility in spending those funds, states can direct them where their priorities are greatest.

Laws and authorities

The coalition members urged Congress to revise the Homeland Security Act of 2002 to exempt security-related records provided to state and local government by the private sector from freedom of information laws. Building trust between states and the private sector in times of disaster depends upon state and local officials' ability to exchange information without fear of public scrutiny, which can hinder preparedness, response and recovery efforts.

The group also encouraged Congress to broaden the mission of the National Guard to allow the Guard to use its vast personnel and equipment resources for homeland security preparedness.

The coalition developed several other recommendations which are outlined in a report titled *Communication, Coordination, and Collaboration: An Intergovernmental Approach to Homeland Security*, available on NEMA's Web site at www.nemaweb.org. The committee forwarded the report to key federal agencies and Congress in February. The individual organizations comprising the committee will work with their leaderships to consider and formally adopt these recommendations and to take further policy positions where necessary.

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