Protecting Rural America

Rural areas face special challenges

By Chad S. Foster and Dr. Carolyn Orr

"Nobody in Arcadia, the only incorporated city in DeSoto County, with a population of 7,000, expected to grapple with Charley. With just a few hours' warning and tornadoes touching down, most of the residents hunkered down in their bathrooms and closets ... Charley's winds tore flimsy mobile homes, RV parks and older wooden homes to shreds ... it will take days to figure out who was home and who wasn't when Charley came knocking."

— USA Today, August 15, 2004

Evacuation and Response

Local police departments and sheriffs' offices provide the bulk of law enforcement services to rural communities. As with many other services, rural areas are severely constrained by a lack of law enforcement resources.

According to a Bureau of Justice Statistics report in 2000, 46.5 percent (5,894) of all local law enforcement agencies employed 10 or fewer
sworn personnel while 5.3 percent (700) employed just one sworn officer.

For this reason, state police often play enhanced roles in rural areas by providing critical support services to smaller local agencies. State law enforcement agencies are stretched further by new demands for terrorism preparedness, while continuing to fill expanding enforcement responsibilities due to changing federal priorities.

No other state knows these challenges better than Florida. Within a two-month span in 2004, four hurricanes struck the state, causing massive damage. The mass evacuation operations required tremendous cooperation within and around the state, especially in rural areas.

“Approximately 2.8 million people were ordered to evacuate for Hurricane Frances—the largest evacuation in Florida’s history,” said Major Leroy Smith, homeland security administrator for the Florida Highway Patrol. “One of the biggest challenges we faced was getting the word out to 2.8 million people, especially residents of rural counties.”

Florida relied on redundant means of communications to ensure that all citizens received the evacuation orders, timelines, and instructions. The news media, through print, radio and television, provided 24-hour coverage of hurricane-related activities. State emergency management agencies also used Internet sites such as www.floridadisaster.org to convey critical information. They held daily conference calls with local emergency managers and law enforcement officials to issue warnings, bulletins, orders, and other instructions.

After the hurricanes had passed, state and local officials continued to face many challenges in rural areas. In order to respond quickly to rural areas, state agencies pre-positioned search and rescue assets. Reentry plans also included roving security patrols and traffic control assistance to manage the flow of assistance and citizens back into their communities.

Rural Hospital Preparedness

Similar to law enforcement limitations, the rural public health infrastructure often presents unique challenges to state and local officials. A recent study by the Advancing National Strategies and Enabling Results Institute for Homeland Security suggests that rural hospitals are alarmingly unprepared to respond to terrorism. “While rural hospitals throughout the nation have achieved different levels of preparedness, many remain inadequately prepared to respond to either a bioterrorist event or an emerging infectious disease,” said Dr. Elin Gursky, author and senior fellow for biodefense and public health at ANSER.

The study also examined possible causes for the disparities between rural and urban hospitals. Work force shortages, lack of access to health care, fiscal restraints, high degrees of complacency, and the perception that rural areas are not at risk are all likely contributors to a general lack of preparedness.

To improve the readiness of rural hospitals, the report recommends:

- **Consolidating planning for homeland security funds across all programs.** The current federal funding system promotes insular planning across the homeland security disciplines. This “programmatic” approach creates “stove-pipe” environments detrimental to integration of resources and efforts among the disciplines.

- **Integrating public health systems vertically and horizontally.** The public health community is often fragmented at the state and local levels, contributing to the disparities between rural and urban hospitals. States should develop and expand regional structures to unite local planning efforts and foster intrastate and interstate aid, promote the sharing of costs and knowledge, and facilitate management of public health activities and grant programs.

- **Improving communications interoperability.** The lack of communications interoperability among public safety and health officials continues to hinder preparedness, especially in rural areas. It is not uncommon for rural dispatch centers, ambulance personnel, emergency medical technicians and hospital personnel to lose communications with each other during emergency response situations.

- **Addressing false or invalidated expectations of support.** While conducting the study of rural hospitals, Gursky found that “there were expectations that the police and military would guard the hospitals and that the state health department would vaccinate people—all expectations of external support that I believe have not been validated.”

There is also a belief among rural health providers that patients will be sent elsewhere for treatment and care in case of a terrorist incident. However, these beliefs are unfounded and are likely inaccurate. For example, a patient infected with a communicable foreign disease would typically be isolated or quarantined in place, along with the staff and other patients in the facility. Rural hospitals must prepare accordingly.

**Agricultural Security Challenges**

According to CSG’s *State Official’s Guide to Critical Infrastructure Protection*, “Our nation’s agriculture and food...
systems and the industries that comprise this sector … account for close to one-fifth of the gross domestic product. In addition, this sector contributes heavily to our export economy.” Unlike other sectors of the national economy, the agriculture sector has historically been responsible for a national trade surplus in the vicinity of $10 billion annually.

Furthermore, a report by the Midwestern Legislative Conference notes that “the actual risks posed by agroterrorism are substantial; many experts consider attacks on agricultural interests both easier to carry out and more likely to inflict widespread economic damage than other, more familiar forms of terrorism.”

This complex system includes supply chains for feed, animals and animal products; crop production and its associated supply chains (seed, fertilizer and related materials); post-harvesting components of the food supply chain, including processing, production, packaging, and storage and distribution; and retail food sales, institutional food services, and consumption (restaurant and home).

“One of the biggest challenges is simply grasping the entire farm-to-fork continuum,” said Richard Kirchoff, executive director for the National Association of State Departments of Agriculture.

Another complicating factor is the short time span between food production and consumption. “We have a short duration food supply between the day it’s produced and the day it’s consumed, probably six or seven days … so if there is a problem introduced into the system, we have to identify it fast,” said Kirchoff.

A successful food-supply system at the national and state levels also requires the timely and regular movement of animals and plants across state lines. State veterinarians understand this and see the need to establish consistency among states around risk assessments for the agricultural industry and disease surveillance plans and systems.

Unfortunately, many veterinarians across the country lack knowledge and experience in identifying and responding to foreign animal and plant diseases. State-level training and exercises have been identified as a critical component to addressing these shortfalls, but the states lack training resources. Adding such tools and resources at the national level would strengthen overall readiness and consistency across all states.

But federal control presents problems of its own; state officials are inundated with regulations, programs and requests from multiple federal departments and agencies, including the Food and Drug Administration, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the U.S. Departments of Agriculture, Defense, and Homeland Security.

In response, the U.S. Department of Homeland Security established a Food and Agriculture Government Coordinating Council to better integrate federal efforts and provide states with a single forum to discuss issues and concerns. This public sector council will work closely with an equivalent private sector council, comprised of firms and associations representing interests throughout the “farm-to-fork” continuum.

Among other success stories, the Laboratory Response Network (LRN) provides a much-improved approach to identifying, confirming and responding to the presence of biological and chemical agents. Established in 1999 by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, LRN is a national network of roughly 120 labs that supports public health, agricultural security and environmental testing needs. The network includes FDA and USDA labs and others that are responsible for ensuring the safety of the food supply.

Multistate partnerships also provide a means to identify interstate challenges and solutions around agricultural security. One successful example is the Multi-States Partnership for Security in Agriculture, a cooperative agreement among Midwestern states including Illinois, Iowa, Kansas, Kentucky, Minnesota, Missouri, Nebraska, Oklahoma, South Dakota and Wisconsin.

“The Partnership seeks to review the different state response plans and determine compatibilities and the incompatibilities among the plans,” said Dr. Ed Hall, assistant director of the Animal Health Division, Kentucky Department of Agriculture.

“Other priorities include the development of an interstate surveillance system and a uniform vulnerability assessment tool.”

The partnership’s success is spreading; states outside of the Midwest have shown an interest in joining this partnership and forming others for improved agricultural security.

Special Consideration for Rural America

Urban areas present many unique security challenges to the states given their high population densities, critical infrastructure and key assets. However, a disproportionate amount of homeland security money has been channeled to urban areas. Although these areas are important, they should not be secured at the expense of rural areas.

Rural areas not only contain a significant segment of the U.S. population, they also produce the food consumed in the urban areas. Rural areas should receive consideration in future planning and grant programs. Low population density does not translate to a low probability of terrorist attack. Rather, many rural and agricultural interests may be easier and more attractive targets for terrorists, especially given the vulnerabilities and possibilities of widespread economic damage.

—Chad S. Foster is a public safety and justice policy analyst at The Council of State Governments. Dr. Carolyn Orr is the chief agriculture and rural policy analyst at CSG.

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