



Testimony

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**EMERGENCY
PREPAREDNESS AND
RESPONSE**

**Some Issues and Challenges
Associated with Major
Emergency Incidents**

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On March 3, 2006, this testimony was reposted to the Web because of two corrections made to the electronic version. The first correction occurs on page 12, where the word “not” has been added. The sentence should say, “The PFO does not direct or replace the incident command system and structure...” The second correction occurs on page 13, where the word “Performance” has been replaced with the word “Preparedness” so that “National Performance Goal” becomes “National Preparedness Goal.”



Mr. Chairman and Members of the Commission,

I appreciate the opportunity to be here today to discuss the challenges of effective emergency preparedness for, response to, and recovery from major emergencies, including catastrophic events. Effective emergency preparedness and response for major events requires the coordinated planning and actions of multiple players from multiple first responder disciplines, jurisdictions, and levels of government as well as nongovernmental entities. Effective emergency preparedness and response requires putting aside parochialism and working together prior to and after an emergency event. As one participant in responding to Katrina put it, the aftermath of a major disaster is no time to be exchanging business cards.

September 11, 2001 fundamentally changed the context of emergency management preparedness in the United States, including federal involvement in preparedness and response. The biggest challenge in emergency preparedness is getting effective cooperation in planning, exercises, and capability assessment and building across first responder disciplines and intergovernmental lines. DHS has developed several policy documents designed to define the federal government's role in supporting state and local first responders in emergencies, implement a uniform incident command structure across the nation, and identify performance standards that can be used in assessing state and local first responder capabilities. Realistic exercises are a key component of testing and assessing emergency plans and first responder capabilities, and the Hurricane PAM planning exercise demonstrated their value. With regard to the status of emergency preparedness across the nation, we know relatively little about how states and localities (1) finance their efforts in this area, (2) have used their federal funds, and (3) are assessing the effectiveness with which they spend those funds. Katrina has raised a host of questions about the nation's readiness to respond effectively to catastrophic emergencies. Effective emergency preparedness is a task that is never done, but requires continuing commitment and leadership because circumstances change and continuing trade-offs because we will never have the funds to do everything we might like to do.

September 11, 2001 Changed the Context of Emergency Preparedness

Prior to September 11, 2001, emergency preparedness and response had primarily been the responsibility of state and local governments and had focused principally on emergencies resulting from nature, such as fires, floods, hurricanes, and earthquakes, or accidental acts of man, not acts of terrorism. The federal government's role in supporting emergency preparedness and management prior to September 11 was limited primarily to providing resources before large-scale disasters like floods, hurricanes, and earthquakes, and response and recovery assistance after such disasters. However, after September 11 and the concern it engendered about the need to be prepared to prevent, mitigate, and respond to acts of terrorism, the extent of the federal government's financial support for state and local government emergency preparedness and response grew enormously, with about \$11 billion in grants distributed from fiscal years 2002 through 2005. At the same time the federal government has been developing guidance and standards for state and local first responders in the areas of incident management and capabilities and tying certain requirements to the award of grants.

The nation's emergency managers and first responders have lead responsibilities for carrying out emergency management efforts. First responders have traditionally been thought of as police, fire fighters, emergency medical personnel, and others who are among the first on the scene of an emergency. However, since September 11, 2001, the definition of first responder has been broadened to include those, such as public health and hospital personnel, who may not be on the scene, but are essential in supporting effective response and recovery operations.¹ The role of first responders is to prevent where possible, protect against,

¹First responders have traditionally been thought of as local fire, police, and emergency medical personnel who respond to events such as fires, floods, traffic or rail accidents, and hazardous materials spills. As a result of the increased concerns about bioterrorism and other potential terrorist attacks, the definition of first responders has been broadened. Section 2 of the Homeland Security Act defined emergency response providers as including "Federal, State, and local emergency public safety, law enforcement, emergency response, emergency medical (including hospital emergency facilities), and related personnel, agencies, and authorities." Homeland Security Act of 2002, Pub.L. No. 107-296 § 2, 116. Stat.2135, 2140 (codified at 6 U.S.C. § 101(6)). Homeland Security Presidential Directive 8 defined the term "first responder" as "individuals who in the early stages of an incident are responsible for the protection and preservation of life, property, evidence, and the environment, including emergency response providers as defined in section 2 of the Homeland Security Act of 2002 (6 U.S.C. 101), as well as emergency management, public health, clinical care, public works, and other skilled support personnel (such as equipment operators) that provide immediate support services during prevention, response, and recovery operations."

respond to, and assist in the recovery from emergency events. First responders are trained and equipped to arrive at the scene of an emergency and take immediate action. Examples include entering the scene of the event and assessing the situation, setting up a command center, establishing safe and secure perimeters around the event site, evacuating those within or near the site, tending to the injured and dead, transporting them to medical care centers or morgues, rerouting traffic, helping to restore public utilities, and clearing debris.

Last year, GAO issued a special report on 21st Century Challenges, examining the federal government's long-term fiscal outlook, the nation's ability to respond to emerging forces reshaping American Society, and the future role of the federal government. Among the issues discussed was homeland security.² In our report we identified the following illustrative challenges and questions for examining emergency preparedness and response in the nation:

- Defining an acceptable, achievable (within budget constraints) level of risk. The nation can never be completely safe; total security is an unachievable goal. Therefore, the issue becomes what is an acceptable level of risk to guide homeland security strategies and investments, particularly federal funding? What criteria should be used to target federal and state funding for homeland security in order to maximize results and mitigate risk within available resource levels?
- What should be the role of federal, state, and local governments in identifying risks—from nature or man—in individual states and localities and establishing standards for the equipment, skills, and capacities that first responders need?
- Are existing incentives sufficient to support private sector protection of critical infrastructure the private sector owns, and what changes might be necessary?
- What is the most viable way to approach homeland security results management and accountability? What are the appropriate goals and who is accountable for the many components of homeland security when many partners and functions and disciplines are involved? How can these actors be held accountable and by whom?

²GAO, *21st Century Challenges: Reexamining the Base of the Federal Government*, [GAO-05-325SP](#) (Washington, D.C.: February 2005).

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- What costs should be borne by federal, state, and local governments or the private sector in preparing for, responding to, and recovery from disasters large and small—whether the acts of nature or the deliberate or accidental acts of man?
 - To what extent and how should the federal government encourage and foster a role for regional or multistate entities in emergency planning and response?

These issues are enormously complex and represent a major challenge for all levels of government. But the experience of Hurricane Katrina illustrated why it is important to tackle these difficult issues. Katrina was a catastrophe of historic proportions in both its geographic scope—about 90,000 square miles—and its destruction. Its impact on individuals and communities was horrific. Katrina highlighted the limitations of our current capacity to respond effectively to catastrophic events—those of unusual severity that almost immediately overwhelm state and local response capacities.³ Katrina gives us an opportunity to learn from what went well and what did not go so well and improve our ability to respond to future catastrophic disasters.

It is generally accepted that emergency preparedness and response should be characterized by measurable goals and effective efforts to identify key gaps between those goals and current capabilities, with a clear plan for closing those gaps and, once achieved, sustaining desired levels of preparedness and response capabilities and performance. The basic goal of emergency preparedness for a major emergency is that first responders should be able to respond swiftly with well-planned, well-coordinated, and effective actions that save lives and property, mitigate the effects of the disaster, and set the stage for a quick, effective recovery. In a major event, coordinated, effective actions are required among responders from different local jurisdictions, levels of government, and nongovernmental entities, such as the Red Cross.

Essentially, all levels of government are still struggling to define and act on the answers to four basic, but hardly simple, questions with regard to emergency preparedness and response:

³ Events need not be catastrophic for the federal government to provide assistance under the Robert T. Stafford Disaster Relief and Emergency Assistance Act, or to provide coordination under the Homeland Security Act of 2002 and the National Response Plan.

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1. What is important (that is, what are our priorities)?
 2. How do we know what is important (e.g., risk assessments, performance standards)?
 3. How do we measure, attain, and sustain success?
 4. On what basis do we make necessary trade-offs, given finite resources?

There are no simple, easy answers to these questions, and the data available for answering them are incomplete and imperfect. We have better information and a sense of what needs to be done for some types of major emergency events than others. For some natural disasters, such as regional wildfires and flooding, there is more experience and therefore a better basis on which to assess preparation and response efforts and identify gaps that need to be addressed. California has experience with earthquakes, and Florida has experience with hurricanes. However, no one in the nation has experience with such potential catastrophes as a dirty bomb detonated in a major city. Nor is there any recent experience with a pandemic that spreads to thousands of people rapidly across the nation, although both the AIDS epidemic and SARS provide some related experience.

Planning and assistance has largely been focused on single jurisdictions and their immediately adjacent neighbors. However, well-documented problems with first responders from multiple jurisdictions to communicate at the site of an incident and the potential for large scale natural and terrorist disasters have generated a debate on the extent to which first responders should be focusing their planning and preparation on a regional and multi-governmental basis.

The area of interoperable communications is illustrative of the general challenge of identifying requirements, current gaps in the ability to meet those requirements and assess success in closing those gaps, and doing this on a multi-jurisdictional basis. We identified three principal challenges to improving interoperable communications for first responders:⁴

- clearly identifying and defining the problem;

⁴GAO, *Homeland Security: Federal Leadership and Intergovernmental Cooperation Required to Achieve First Responder Interoperable Communications*, [GAO-04-470](#) (Washington, D.C.: July 20, 2004).

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- establishing national interoperability performance goals and standards that balance nationwide standards with the flexibility to address differences in state, regional, and local needs and conditions; and
 - defining the roles of federal, state, and local governments and other entities in addressing interoperable needs.

The first, and most formidable, challenge in establishing effective interoperable communications is defining the problem and establishing interoperability requirements. This requires addressing the following questions: Who needs to communicate what (voice and/or data) with whom, when, for what purpose, under what conditions? Public safety officials generally recognize that effective interoperable communications is the ability to talk with whom you want, when you want, when authorized, but not the ability to talk with everyone all of the time. Various reports, including ours, have identified a number of barriers to achieving interoperable public safety wire communications, including incompatible and aging equipment, limited equipment standards, and fragmented planning and collaboration. However, perhaps the fundamental barrier has been and is the lack of effective, collaborative, interdisciplinary, and intergovernmental planning. The needed technology flows from a clear statement of communications needs and plans that cross jurisdictional lines. No one first responder group or governmental agency can successfully “fix” the interoperable communications problems that face our nation.

The capabilities needed vary with the severity and scope of the event. In a “normal” daily event, such as a freeway accident, the first responders who need to communicate may be limited to those in a single jurisdiction or immediately adjacent jurisdictions. However, in a catastrophic event, effective interoperable communications among responders is vastly more complicated because the response involves responders from the federal government—civilian and military—and, as happened after Katrina, responders from various state and local governments who arrived to provide help under the Emergency Management Assistance Compact (EMAC) among states. These responders generally bring their own communications technology that may or may not be compatible with those of the responders in the affected area. Even if the technology were compatible, it may be difficult to know because responders from different jurisdictions may use different names for the same communications frequencies. To address this issue, we recommended that a nationwide

database of all interoperable communications frequencies, and a common nomenclature for those frequencies, be established.

Katrina reminded us that in a catastrophic event, most forms of communication may be severely limited or simply destroyed—land lines, cell phone towers, satellite phone lines (which quickly became saturated). So even if all responders had had the technology to communicate with one another, they would have found it difficult to do so because transmission towers and other key supporting infrastructure were not functioning. The more comprehensive the interoperable communications capabilities we seek to build, the more difficult it is to reach agreement among the many players on how to do so and the more expensive it is to buy and deploy the needed technology. And an always contentious issue is who will pay for the technology—purchase, training, maintenance, and updating.

DHS Activities to Identify What Needs to Be Done to Promote Emergency Preparedness Capabilities of First Responders

Effective preparation and response requires clear planning, a clear understanding of expected roles and responsibilities, and performance standards that can be used to measure the gap between what is and what should be. It also requires identifying the essential capabilities whose development should be a priority, and capabilities that are useful, but not as critical to successful response and mitigation in a major emergency. What is critical may cut across different types of events (e.g., incident command and communications) or may be unique to a specific type of event (e.g., defusing an explosive device).

DHS has undertaken three major policy initiatives to promote the further development of the all-hazards emergency preparedness capabilities of first responders. These include the development of the (1) National Response Plan (what needs to be done to manage a nationally significant incident, focusing on the role of federal agencies); (2) National Incident Management System (NIMS), a command and management process to be used with the National Response Plan during an emergency event (how to do what needs to be done); and (3) National Preparedness Goal (NPG), which identifies critical tasks and capabilities (how well it should be done).

The National Response Plan's (NRP) stated purpose is to “establish a comprehensive, national, all-hazards approach to domestic incident management across a spectrum of activities including prevention, preparedness, response, and recovery.” It is designed to provide the framework for federal interaction with state, local, and tribal governments; the private sector; and nongovernmental organizations. The Robert T.

Stafford Disaster Relief and Emergency Assistance Act, as amended, established the process for states to request a presidential disaster declaration in order to respond to and recover from events that exceed state and local capabilities and resources. Under the NRP and the Stafford Act,⁵ the role of the federal government is principally to support state and local response activities. A key organizational principle of the NRP is that “incidents are typically managed at the lowest possible geographic, organizational, and jurisdictional level.” An “incident of national significance” triggers federal support under the NRP; a second “catastrophic incident” trigger allows for accelerated federal support. All catastrophic incidents are incidents of national significance, but not vice-versa. The basic assumption of the federal government as supplement to state and local first responders was challenged by Katrina, which (1) destroyed key communications infrastructure; (2) overwhelmed state and local response capacity, in many cases crippling their ability to perform their anticipated roles as initial on-site responders; and (3) destroyed the homes and affected the families of first responders, reducing their capacity to respond. Katrina almost completely destroyed the basic structure and operations of some local governments as well as their business and economic bases.

The NRP defines a catastrophic incident as:

“any natural or manmade incident, including terrorism, that results in extraordinary levels of mass casualties, damage, or disruption severely affecting the population, infrastructure, environment, economy, national morale, and/or government functions. A catastrophic incident could result in sustained national impacts over a prolonged period of time; almost immediately exceeds resources normally available to State, local, tribal, and private-sector authorities in the impacted area; and significantly interrupts governmental operations and emergency services to such an extent that national security could be threatened. All catastrophic incidents are Incidents of National Significance. These factors drive the urgency for coordinated national planning to ensure accelerated Federal/national assistance.”⁶

⁵ The Stafford Act is the short title for the Robert T. Stafford Disaster Relief and Emergency Assistance Act, P.L. 93-288, as amended.

⁶ The NRP includes a Catastrophic Incident Annex, which applies to a subset of incidents of national significance meeting the NRP’s definition of a “catastrophic incident.” The annex does not apply unless the Secretary of Homeland Security designates the incident as “catastrophic,” which did not occur during Hurricane Katrina.

Exactly what this means for federal, state, and local response has been the subject of recent congressional hearings on Katrina and the recently issued report by the Select Bipartisan Committee to Investigate the Preparation for and Response to Hurricane Katrina.⁷

Homeland Security Presidential Directive 5 required the adoption of NIMS by all federal departments and agencies and that federal preparedness grants be dependent upon NIMS compliance by the recipients. NIMS is designed as the nation's incident management system. The intent of NIMS is to establish a core set of concepts, principles, terminology, and organizational processes to enable effective, efficient, and collaborative emergency event management at all levels. The idea is that if state and local first responders implement NIMS in their daily response activities, they will have a common terminology and understanding of incident management that will foster a swift and effective response when emergency responders from a variety of levels of government and locations must come together to respond to a major incident. As we noted in our report on interoperable communications, such communications are but one important component of an effective incident command planning and operations structure.

Homeland Security Presidential Directive 8 required DHS to coordinate the development of a national domestic all-hazards preparedness goal "to establish measurable readiness priorities and targets that appropriately balance the potential threat and magnitude of terrorist attacks and large-scale natural or accidental disasters with the resources required to prevent, respond to, and recover from them." The goal was also to include readiness metrics and standards for preparedness assessments and strategies and a system for assessing the nation's overall preparedness to respond to major events. To implement the directive, DHS developed the National Preparedness Goal using 15 emergency event scenarios,⁸ 12 of

⁷*A Failure of Initiative: Final Report of the Select Bipartisan Committee to Investigate the Preparation for and Response to Hurricane Katrina* (Washington, D.C.: February 15, 2006).

⁸The 15 scenarios were: (1) improvised nuclear device attack, (2) aerosol anthrax attack, (3) pandemic influenza, (4) biological attack with plague, (5) chemical attack with blister agent, (6) chemical attack with toxic chemical agent, (7) chemical attack with nerve agent, (8) chemical attack resulting in chlorine tank explosion, (9) major earthquake, (10) major hurricane, (11) radiological attack with dispersal device, (12) improvised explosive device attack, (13) biological attack with food contamination, (14) biological attack with foreign animal disease (foot and mouth disease), and (15) cyber attack.

which were terrorist related,⁹ whose purpose was to form the basis for identifying the capabilities needed to respond to a wide range of emergency events. Some state and local officials and experts have questioned whether the scenarios were appropriate inputs for preparedness planning, particularly in terms of their plausibility and the emphasis on terrorist scenarios (12 of 15). The scenarios focused on the consequences that first responders would have to address. According to DHS's National Preparedness Guidance, the planning scenarios are intended to illustrate the scope and magnitude of large-scale, catastrophic emergency events for which the nation needs to be prepared. Using the scenarios, and in consultation with federal, state, and local emergency response stakeholders, DHS developed a list of over 1,600 discrete tasks, of which 300 were identified as critical tasks. DHS then identified 36 target capabilities to provide guidance to federal, state, and local first responders on the capabilities they need to develop and maintain. That list has since been refined, and DHS released a revised draft list of 37 capabilities in December 2005 (see appendix I). Because no single jurisdiction or agency would be expected to perform every task, possession of a target capability could involve enhancing and maintaining local resources, ensuring access to regional and federal resources, or some combination of the two. However, DHS is still in the process of developing goals, requirements, and metrics for these capabilities; and DHS is reassessing both the National Response Plan and the National Preparedness Goal in light of the Hurricane Katrina experience. Prior to Katrina, DHS had established seven priorities for enhancing national first responder preparedness:

- implementation of NRP and NIMS;
- implementation of the Interim National Infrastructure Protection Plan;¹⁰
- expanding regional cooperation;
- strengthening capabilities in interoperable communications;
- strengthening capabilities in information sharing and collaboration;
- strengthening capabilities in medical surge and mass prophylaxis; and
- strengthening capabilities in detection and response for chemical, biological, radiological, nuclear, and explosive weapons.

⁹According to DHS officials, there was less concern about planning for natural disasters because there is a tremendous amount of experience, actuarial data, geographical and seasonal patterns, and other information that is not available in the context of terrorism.

¹⁰ The goal of the plan, issued in draft in November 2005, is to enhance protection of the nation's critical infrastructure and key resources to prevent, deter, neutralize, or mitigate the effects of deliberate efforts by terrorists to "destroy, incapacitate, or exploit" them.

Those seven priorities are incorporated into DHS's fiscal year 2006 homeland security grant guidance. The guidance also adds an eighth priority that emphasizes emergency operations and catastrophic planning.

The Critical Importance of Realistic Exercises and After-Action Reports

With almost any skill and capability, experience and practice enhance proficiency. For first responders, exercises—particularly for the type or magnitude of events for which there is little actual experience—are essential for developing skills and identifying what works well and what needs further improvement. Major emergency incidents, particularly catastrophic incidents, by definition require the coordinated actions of personnel from many first responder disciplines and all levels of government, plus nonprofit organizations and the private sector. It is difficult to overemphasize the importance of effective interdisciplinary, intergovernmental planning, training, and exercises in developing the coordination and skills needed for effective response.

Following are some illustrative tasks needed to prepare for and respond to a major emergency incident that could be tested with realistic exercises:

Preparation:

- assessing potential needs, marshalling key resources, and moving property and people out of harm's way prior to the actual event (where predictable or where there is forewarning),

Response

- obtaining and communicating accurate situational data for evaluating and coordinating appropriate response during and after the event;
- leadership: effectively blending (1) active involvement of top leadership in unified incident command and control with (2) decentralized decision making authority that encourages innovative approaches to effective response;
- clearly understood roles and responsibilities prior to and in response to the event;
- effective communication and coordination; and
- the ability to identify, draw on, and effectively deploy resources from other governmental, nonprofit, and private entities for effective response

For exercises to be effective in identifying both strengths and areas needing attention, it is important that they be realistic, designed to test and stress the system, involve all key persons who would be involved in

responding to an actual event, and be followed by honest and realistic assessments that result in action plans that are implemented. In addition to relevant first responders, exercise participants should include, depending upon the scope and nature of the exercise, mayors, governors, and state and local emergency managers who would be responsible for such things as determining if and when to declare a mandatory evacuation or ask for federal assistance. The Hurricane PAM exercise of 2004 was essentially a detailed planning exercise that was highly realistic and involved a wide variety of federal, state, and local first responders and officials. Although action plans based on this exercise were still being developed and implemented when Katrina hit, the exercise proved to be remarkably prescient in identifying the challenges presented if a major hurricane hit New Orleans and resulted in flooding the city.

The importance of post-exercise assessments is illustrated by a November 2005 report by the Department of Homeland Security's Office of Inspector General on the April 2005 Top Officials 3 Exercise (TOPOFF3) which noted that the exercise highlighted at all levels of government a fundamental lack of understanding regarding the principles and protocols set forth in the NRP and NIMS.¹¹ For example, the report cited confusion over the different roles and responsibilities performed by the Principal Federal Officer (PFO) and the Federal Coordinating Officer (FCO). The PFO is designated by the DHS Secretary to act as the Secretary's local representative in overseeing and executing the incident management responsibilities under HSPD-5 for incidents of national significance. The PFO does not direct or replace the incident command system and structure, and does not have direct authority over the senior law enforcement officials, the FCO, or other federal and state officials. The FCO is designated by the President and manages federal resources and support activities in response to disasters and emergencies declared by the President. The FCO is responsible for coordinating the timely delivery of federal disaster assistance and programs to the affected state, the private sector, and individual victims. The FCO also has authority under the Stafford Act to request and direct federal departments and agencies to use their authorities and resources in support of state and local response and recovery efforts.

¹¹DHS Office of Inspector General, *A Review of the Top Officials 3 Exercise*, OIG-06-07 (Washington, D.C.: November 2005).

In addition to confusion over the respective roles and authority of the PFO and FCO, the report noted that the exercise highlighted problems regarding the designation of a PFO and the lack of guidance on training and certification standards for PFO support personnel. The report recommended that DHS continue to train and exercise the NRP and NIMS at all levels of government and develop operating procedures that clearly define individual and organizational roles and responsibilities under the NRP.

Our Knowledge of State and Local Efforts to Improve Their Capabilities Is Limited

In the last several years, the federal government has awarded some \$11 billion in grants to federal, state, and local authorities to improve emergency preparedness, response, and recovery capabilities. What is remarkable about the whole area of emergency preparedness and homeland security is how little we know about how states and localities (1) finance their efforts in this area, (2) have used their federal funds, and (3) are assessing the effectiveness with which they spend those funds.

The National Capital Region (NCR) is the only area in the nation that has a statutorily designated regional coordinator.¹² In our review of emergency preparedness in the NCR, we noted that a coordinated, targeted, and complementary use of federal homeland security grant funds was important in the NCR—as it is in all areas of the nation. The findings from our work on the NCR are relevant to all multiagency, multijurisdictional efforts to assess and improve emergency preparedness and response capabilities.

In May 2004, we reported that the NCR faced three interrelated challenges: the lack of (1) preparedness standards (which the National Preparedness Goal was designed to address); (2) a coordinated regionwide plan for establishing first responder performance goals, needs, and priorities, and assessing the benefits of expenditures in enhancing first responder capabilities; and (3) a readily available, reliable source of data on the funds available to first responders in the NCR and their use.¹³ Without the

¹²The NCR is composed of the District of Columbia and surrounding jurisdictions in the states of Maryland and Virginia.

¹³GAO, *Homeland Security: Management of First Responder Grants in the National Capital Region Reflects the Need for Coordinated Planning and Performance Goals*, [GAO-04-433](#) (Washington, D.C.: May 2004); and *Homeland Security: Managing First Responder Grants to Enhance Emergency Preparedness in the National Capital Region*, [GAO-05-889T](#) (Washington, D.C.: July 14, 2005).

standards, a regionwide plan, and data on spending, we noted, it is extremely difficult to determine whether NCR first responders have the ability to respond to threats and emergencies with well-planned, well-coordinated, and effective efforts that involve a variety of first responder disciplines from NCR jurisdictions. To the extent that the NCR had coordinated the use of federal grant funds, it had focused on funds available through the Urban Area Security Initiative grants. We noted that it was important to have information on all grant funds available to NCR jurisdictions and their use if the NCR was to effectively leverage regional funds and avoid unnecessary duplication. As we observed, the fragmented nature of the multiple federal grants available to first responders—some awarded to states, some to localities, some directly to first responder agencies—may make it more difficult to collect and maintain regionwide data on the grant funds received and the use of those funds. Our previous work suggests that this fragmentation in federal grants may reinforce state and local fragmentation and can also make it more difficult to coordinate and use those multiple sources of funds to achieve specific objectives.¹⁴

A new feature in the fiscal year 2006 DHS homeland security grant guidance for the Urban Area Security Initiative (UASI) grants is that eligible recipients must provide an “investment justification” with their grant application. States must use this justification to outline the implementation approaches for specific investments that will be used to achieve the initiatives outlined in their state Program and Capability Enhancement Plan. These plans are multiyear global program management plans for the entire state homeland security program that look beyond federal homeland security grant programs and funding. The justifications must justify all funding requested through the DHS homeland security grant program, including all UASI funding, any base formula allocations for the State Homeland Security Program and the Law Enforcement Terrorism Prevention Program, and all formula allocations under the Metropolitan Medical Response System and Citizen Corps Program. In the guidance DHS notes that it will use a peer review process to evaluate grant applications on the basis of the effectiveness of a state’s plan to address the priorities it has outlined and thereby reduce its overall risk.

¹⁴GAO, *Homeland Security: Reforming Federal Grants to Better Meet Outstanding Needs*, GAO-03-1146T (Washington, D.C.: September 3, 2003).

Catastrophic Events

On February 1, 2006, GAO issued its preliminary observations regarding the preparation for and response to Hurricane Katrina.¹⁵ Catastrophic events are different in the severity of the damage, number of persons affected, and the scale of preparation and response required. They quickly overwhelm or incapacitate local and/or state response capabilities, thus requiring coordinated assistance from outside the affected area. Thus, the response and recovery capabilities needed during a catastrophic event differ significantly from those required to respond to and recover from a “normal disaster.” Key capabilities such as emergency communications, continuity of essential government services, and logistics and distribution systems underpin citizen safety and security and may be severely affected. Katrina basically destroyed state and local communications capabilities, severely affecting timely, accurate damage assessments in the wake of Katrina.

Whether the catastrophic event comes without warning or there is some prior notice, such as a hurricane, it is essential that the leadership roles, responsibilities, and lines of authority for responding to such an event be clearly defined and effectively communicated in order to facilitate rapid and effective decision making, especially in preparing for and in the early hours and days after the event. Streamlining, simplifying, and expediting decision making must quickly replace “business as usual.” Yet at the same time, uncoordinated initiatives by well-meaning persons or groups can actually hinder effective response, as was the case following Katrina.

Katrina raised a number of questions about the nation’s ability to respond effectively to catastrophic events—even one with several days warning. GAO has underway work on a number of issues related to the preparation, response, recovery, and reconstruction efforts related to Hurricanes Katrina and Rita. We are examining what went well and why and what did not go well and why, and what our findings suggest for any specific changes that may be needed.

Concluding Observations

Assessing, developing, attaining, and sustaining needed emergency preparedness, response, and recovery capabilities is a difficult task that requires sustained leadership, the coordinated efforts of many

¹⁵ GAO, *Statement of Comptroller General David M. Walker on GAO’s Preliminary Observations Regarding Preparedness and Response to Hurricanes Katrina and Rita*, [GAO-06-365R](#) (Washington, D.C.: February 1, 2006).

stakeholders from a variety of first responder disciplines, levels of government, and nongovernmental entities. There is a no “silver bullet,” no easy formula. It is also a task that is never done, but requires continuing commitment and leadership and trade-offs because circumstances change and we will never have the funds to do everything we might like to do.

The basic steps are easy to state but extremely difficult to complete:

- develop a strategic plan with clear goals, objectives, and milestones;
- develop performance goals that can be used to set desired performance baselines
- collect and analyze relevant and reliable data;
- assess the results of analyzing those data against performance goals to guide priority setting;
- take action based on those results; and
- monitor the effectiveness of actions taken to achieve the designated performance goals.

It is important to identify the specific types of capabilities, such as incident command and control, with broad application across emergencies arising from “all-hazards,” and those that are unique to particular types of emergency events. The priority to be given to the development of specific, “unique” capabilities should be tied to an assessment of the risk that those capabilities will be needed. In California, for example, it is not a question of if, but when, a major earthquake will strike the state. There is general consensus that the nation is at risk of an infectious pandemic at some point, and California has just issued a draft plan for preparing and responding to such an event. On the other hand, assessing specific terrorist risks is more difficult.

As the nation assesses the lessons of Katrina, we must incorporate those lessons in assessing state and local emergency management plans, amend those plans as appropriate, and reflect those changes in planned expenditures and exercises. This effort requires clear priorities, hard choices, and objective assessments of current plans and capabilities. Failure to address these difficult tasks directly and effectively will result in preparedness and response efforts that are less effective than they should and can be.

That concludes my statement, and I would be pleased to respond to any questions the Commission Members may have.

Appendix I: DHS's Target Capabilities List 2.0 (Draft) as of December 2005

Common Target Capabilities

Planning
Communications
Risk management
Community preparedness and participation

Prevent Mission Area

Information gathering and recognition of indicators and warnings
Intelligence analysis and production
Intelligence/information sharing and dissemination
Law enforcement investigation and operations
CBRNE detection

Protect Mission Area

Critical infrastructure protection (CIP)
Food and agriculture safety and defense
Epidemiological surveillance and investigation
Public health laboratory testing

Respond Mission Area

Onsite incident management
Emergency operations center management
Critical resource logistics and distribution
Volunteer management and donations
Responder safety and health
Public safety and security response
Animal health emergency support
Environmental health
Explosive device response operations
Firefighting operations/support
WMD/hazardous materials response and decontamination
Citizen Protection: evacuation and/or in-place protection
Isolation and quarantine
Urban search and rescue
Emergency public information and warning
Triage and pre-hospital treatment
Medical surge
Medical supplies management and distribution
Mass prophylaxis
Mass prophylaxis appendix
Mass care (sheltering, feeding, and related services)
Fatality management

Recover Mission Area

Structural damage and mitigation assessment
Restoration of lifelines
Economic and community recovery

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