

ADVICE+DISSENT: Viewpoint Paying It Forward

By Joshua D. Filler and Timothy L. Beres *Government Executive* July 1, 2008

States must continue to play vital role in homeland security funding.

One of the 9/11 commission's many findings was that government's approach to homeland security was fragmented. Agencies often failed to share information or could not communicate adequately during a disaster. In the interest of speeding money to critical programs, some in Congress are considering bypassing the states in the homeland security funding process. Ironically, such a move would force the Homeland Security Department to fund local entities directly through fragmented grant programs.

From the beginning, DHS and Congress determined that most homeland security grants should be distributed first to the states and then down to local governments and spent according to a statewide or regional homeland security plan for prevention, protection, response and recovery activities. The majority of that funding would go to local governments to carry out those activities.

If one were to design the ideal structure to protect against terrorist groups or major catastrophes, the federal system would not be it. It is designed to diffuse power and control through a tripartite federal government with 50 sovereign states; thousands of semiautonomous counties, cities, villages and towns; and tens of thousands of public safety agencies. The states play a key role in integrating the federal government and local agencies in this massive homeland security network, and bypassing them would invite chaos.

Homeland security grants through the states seek to enhance national preparedness and security by integrating capabilities across all levels of government. States have wide operational, legislative/legal, regulatory and financial jurisdiction, whereas local governments' authority usually starts and ends at the city or county limits.

Issues such as strategic planning, information sharing, mass evacuation planning, communications, and the protection of interdependent infrastructure systems demand a broad, statewide perspective that balances national priorities with local needs and maximizes homeland security funds. When states are not allowed to perform this role, the result is misallocation of resources and duplication of effort.

How can state government develop or enforce compliance with an interoperable communications plan if it has no authority over the federal funds allocated for such a plan? And in the absence of such compliance, will the nation ever have inter-operable communications?

The states' role as integrator does not undermine the role local governments play in homeland security. Indeed, the majority of tactical on-the-ground capabilities, such as law enforcement and firefighting operations, reside with local governments.

The federal government must reinvigorate its partnership with the states in developing and implementing homeland security programs. Cutting them out of the funding picture would further fragment government's ability to deal with all threats - manmade and natural. If some states are not performing, the problems should be identified and addressed. But the slowness with which some homeland security funds are spent has little

to do with the states and virtually everything to do with antiquated local procurement laws.

States must begin to speak more effectively as a cohesive unit on homeland security issues to ensure that all stakeholders have a clear understanding of their roles and many achievements in protecting the nation.

Joshua D. Filler is former director of the Homeland Security Department's Office of State and Local Government Coordination; Timothy L. Beres is former director of preparedness programs for the agency's Office of Grants and Training.