

Regional Solutions *to* Homeland Security

Regional approaches to public safety help safety providers share responsibilities and resources, improve operations and meet future demands

By Chad Foster



One year after responding to the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks on the Pentagon, local and state law enforcement and public safety officials from the National Capital Region found themselves involved in another unprecedented emergency situation. Two sniper suspects terrorized the region for three weeks in October 2002, forcing law enforcement personnel from more than 30 local, state and federal agencies to work collectively to investigate the repeated killings, and identify and arrest the perpetrators.

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The attacks on the Pentagon in Arlington County, Va., involved a single crime scene and a massive emergency response operation. The sniper incident resulted in multiple crime scenes and a mix of other terrorism prevention and response activities. One common requirement surfaced during both case studies—the need for a coordinated, regional public safety effort.

Many states are developing regional approaches to public safety. According to a June 2005 report by The Council of State Governments, “creating regions or zones helps to remove or reduce local jurisdictional barriers for operational purposes.” Many local jurisdictions lack the resources needed to prevent and respond to a full array of hazards and threats, as well as the expertise needed to conduct homeland security planning. “For these and other reasons, states are turning to regions or zones as an alternative,” the report concluded.

Despite the benefits of “regionalization,” the meaning of regional preparedness and activities that help foster cross-jurisdictional collaboration is unclear. In addition, standards and methods to measure regional progress are relatively nonexistent.

What is Regional Preparedness?

There are two common goals associated with regional public safety efforts—enhanced preparedness and good governance. As Hurricane Katrina showed in 2005, catastrophic events often impact areas well beyond traditional state and local boundaries. Therefore, preparations for and improvements to emergency response and recovery operations should account for such large-scale events.

In addition to enhanced preparedness, regional efforts allow state and local jurisdictions to do “more with less.” For example, regional approaches promote cost-sharing to maximize states’ use of funds and capitalize on economies of scale by purchasing higher quantities of sophisticated equipment at lower costs. Grant administrative functions may also be centralized at the regional level, saving personnel costs.

Regional approaches are common around metropolitan areas because of their high population densities, critical infrastructure and risks for being targeted by terrorists. In fact, the U.S. Department of Homeland Security’s *National Preparedness Goal*, October 2005, defines a region as “a geographic area consisting of contiguous state, local, and tribal entities located in a whole or in part within a designated planning radius of a core high threat urban area.”

However, the report stressed that states should not overlook rural areas as candidates for “regionalization” because it can help local jurisdictions to leverage scarce homeland security resources and knowledge. Regionalization also helps with evacuation and

emergency response in vast and often desolate areas; the rural public health infrastructure lags behind its urban equivalent and there are unique threats to the agricultural industry.

In addition, according to a 2002 Midwestern Legislative Conference report, natural disasters are more likely to devastate rural areas, which comprise 97.5 percent of the total U.S. land area.

Regional stakeholders may achieve enhanced preparedness, including coordination, in different ways. A September 2004 Government Accountability Office report defined regional coordination as “the use of government resources in a complementary way toward goals and objectives that are mutually agreed upon by various stakeholders in the region.” However, the coordination of resources cannot take place at the regional level unless those resources are known and organized at the local level.

Regional response and recovery operations require the seamless sharing of resources such as personnel, equipment and facilities. For that reason, many regional planning and coordination efforts focus on developing or improving policies that govern the use of these resources, a 2005 report from the National Association of County and City Health Officials (NACCHO) said.

Enhanced information-sharing across jurisdictional boundaries also leads to improved situational awareness and decision-making. Regional efforts help to identify hazards and threats outside of jurisdictions.

Regional Characteristics

To better understand regional characteristics and complexities, the CSG project team conducted online research and phone interviews with stakeholders in 20 regions. The group selected 10 regions from the U.S. Department of Homeland Security’s FY2005 list of Urban Areas Security Initiative and 10 states with a statewide regional effort.

The research found:

- Fourteen of 16 regions exist as part of statewide terrorism prevention and emergency response effort. All the non-metropolitan regions are organized under a statewide regional effort.
- Seven of 10 UASI regions closely overlap with a single integrated local jurisdictional entity such as a county. All nonmetropolitan regions span multiple local jurisdictions.
- Public safety-oriented regions are formed across a mix of existing regional efforts. Two of five metropolitan regions that are part of a voluntary “council of governments” utilize those governance, planning and coordination entities for public safety purposes. Nonmetropolitan regions follow similar patterns.

- Public safety-oriented regions generally conduct more planning and coordination activities than operational ones.

Variables Affecting Regional Cooperation

Regional public safety efforts have many unique qualities that make generalizations about the efforts difficult, especially when these variables are not accounted for and controlled on some level. For example, the techniques that regional stakeholders consider and implement to foster regional cooperation may significantly differ depending on the number and composition of member states and local jurisdictions. One way to account for structural variables is to separate regions into four separate groups:

- Multi-state regions or metropolitan regions that encompass local jurisdictions in more than one state.
- Regions that closely overlap with a single local jurisdiction.
- Metropolitan regions that do not overlap with a single local jurisdiction.
- Nonmetropolitan regions that do not overlap with a single local jurisdiction.

Use of Existing Regions

Public safety-oriented regions are forming across existing regional efforts. Two of five metropolitan regions that are part of a voluntary “council of governments” use those governance, planning and coordination entities for public safety purposes. Although some go by other names, there are more than 600 regional “councils of governments” in the United States that exist for a myriad of public policy purposes, according to the North Central Texas Council of Governments.

The National Capital Region, for example, uses the Metropolitan Washington Council of Governments for a range of public safety and homeland security planning and coordination purposes. The Dallas/Fort Worth UASI region uses its similarly robust North Central Texas Council of Governments—which

includes 16 counties and other local governments—for public safety planning. Emergency preparedness is one of many different priorities for the council.

That’s not always the case. Cincinnati, Denver and Portland, for example, are part of “council of governments” entities—the Ohio-Kentucky—Indiana Council of Governments, Denver Regional Council of Governments, and Greater Portland Council of Governments respectively—but public safety is not part of the planning structures.

Authority and Membership

There are a number of authorities and incentives that states and local jurisdictions use to foster regional collaboration. Most regional entities are voluntary associations of local jurisdictions and derive authority through a mix of state and local statutes, governors’ executive orders, memorandums of agreements and understanding, and the participation of local elected officials and top-level executives.

The National Capital Region may be the only region to derive authority from a federal statute—the Homeland Security Act of 2002 defined the region’s membership. Regions utilizing a “council of governments,” such as the Dallas/Fort Worth UASI region, may derive authority through those planning structures. Texas Local Government Code 391 authorized the creation of North Central Texas Council of Governments as a political subdivision of the state. Soon after the 2001 terrorist attacks, Gov. Jeb Bush of Florida signed an executive order creating a Regional Domestic Security Task Force in each of the Florida Department of Law Enforcement’s seven regions.

The active role of elected and top-level executive officials in regional planning and coordination efforts also serves as an authority. The San Diego County Board of Supervisors is part of the San Diego region’s decision-making process. Louisville’s Criminal Justice Commission is the primary conduit for that region’s collaborative planning process.

The availability of federal and state homeland security funding and guidelines attached to those programs may also serve as a





strong incentive for fostering regional planning and cooperation. In 1997, only select cities received funding for domestic preparedness related to weapons of mass destruction. In 2005, \$2.5 billion was allocated to states for the State Homeland Security Grant Program.

Regional Operations

Public safety-oriented regions are conducting operational activities to a lesser degree than planning and coordination. Most operational functions encompass specific functions, such as urban search and rescue teams and hazardous materials response teams. The Charlotte Urban Area's 2004 Homeland Security Strategy, for example, identifies the objective of providing "a Regional Urban Search & Rescue Team with redundant capabilities." Kentucky has 12 regional WMD/HazMat teams equipped and trained to respond within a one-hour notice to local, regional and statewide hazardous material incidents.

Regional-level operations may also enhance state, regional and local terrorism prevention efforts. New York State is segmented into 16 Counterterrorism Zones to assist in the identification, analysis and dissemination of terrorism-related information and intelligence, among other purposes.

Operational plans and activities are especially common in regions that closely overlap a single local jurisdiction. For example, the city and county of San Diego and 17 incorporated cities within the county are organized as the San Diego Operational Area, a requirement of the state's Standardized Emergency Management System.

Assessing Regional Preparedness

Improving regional preparedness appears to be a high national priority, especially in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina and the enormous homeland security financial investments made on the federal level. Evidence suggests that "regionalization" is becoming more commonplace on state and local levels. "Thinking regionally" is not a simple notion, and requires planning and coordination at the policy and practitioner levels to overcome cross-jurisdictional issues. In addition, the concept of public safety "regionalization" is relatively new, and few studies have focused on regional development and activities. For these reasons, few tools or methods exist to help public safety officials demonstrate heightened levels of preparedness or progress.

The U.S. Government Accountability Office identified a number of factors that support regional coordination in a 2004 report, including the need for regional standards to help identify gaps between current performance standards and strategic goals.

There are programs that offer professional accepted practices and benchmarks for measuring public safety preparedness. Among them:

- The Commission on Accreditation for Law Enforcement Agencies, which establishes standards that "reflect the best professional requirements and practices for a law enforcement agency."
- The Global Justice Information Sharing Initiative, which produced and disseminated the National Criminal Intelligence Sharing Plan in April 2004, providing a national framework for criminal intelligence and information sharing standards.
- Global's 17 guidelines released in August 2005 to assist law enforcement agencies in the development and operations of intelligence fusion centers.

The application of these programs to a regional entity or effort is unclear.

Leaders in the National Capital Region, however, decided in 2004 to use a nationally recognized emergency management standard and accreditation program—the Emergency Management Accreditation Program—to assess the region's emergency management capabilities. The EMAP standards are scalable and apply to emergency management programs of any size; including regions of varying sizes and composition. Working with regional stakeholders, EMAP is identifying and reviewing regional-level emergency documents against EMAP standards.

This project will provide regions with an assessment of local and regional capabilities based on national emergency preparedness standards, and serve as a test for how EMAP standards and assessment processes might be applied in other areas.

Making Regional Improvements

Similar to the trend in other public policy areas, regional cooperation will likely become more important and popular in the public safety sector. Blind to jurisdictional barriers, the public will continue to demand more public safety services at a higher quality and lower overall cost. Regionalizing efforts is one way for public safety providers to share responsibilities and resources, improve operations and meet these future demands. In short, "thinking regionally" is much more than an abstract concept for public safety officials today; it's the new way of doing business.

—Chad Foster is a special projects coordinator for the Emergency Management Accreditation Program. For more information on the report, see <http://www.csg.org>, keyword: protect