REGIONAL APPROACHES TO HOMELAND SECURITY PLANNING & PREPAREDNESS

SURVEY OF THE NATION'S REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT ORGANIZATIONS

NADO

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A VALUE-ADDED APPROACH: REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT ORGANIZATIONS

- **The nation's network of 520 regional development organizations and regional councils of government provide forums for local elected officials and other key community stakeholders to explore and address issues of regional significance.**

- **These public entities provide administrative, programmatic, planning and technical assistance to local governments within a multi-jurisdictional region on issues such as community and economic development, emergency management, housing, transportation, workforce development and census data management.**

- **As organizations formed and governed primarily by local elected officials, these regional organizations have credibility with local governments, years of experience in coordinating local efforts across political boundaries and the capacity to provide regional forums for dialogue, coordination and strategic planning.**

- **The vast majority of these regional entities hold various federal designations and were organized and created predominantly by action of their state's governor or legislature. Generally known as regional development organizations (RDOs), they are known locally by many names, including: area development districts, councils of government, local development districts, regional councils of government, planning and development commissions, and regional planning commissions.**

Regional Approaches To Homeland Security Preparedness

A common mission of federal policymakers, state officials and local governmental leaders is to improve the nation's preparedness, prevention and response capacity for catastrophic events such as terrorist attacks and natural disasters. An emerging approach to safeguarding the nation's assets and citizens involves establishing regional partnerships and cooperation among governmental agencies, businesses, educational institutions and community groups.

In July 2005, the National Association of Development Organizations (NADO) conducted a survey of the nation's 520 regional development organizations (RDOs) to examine the various regional initiatives, models and strategies being used by state and local officials to enhance intergovernmental and interjurisdictional collaborations. The research project also focused on identifying the specific and diverse roles being played by the nation's network of regional development organizations within the broad context of homeland security and emergency management. The results and highlights are featured throughout this report.

This project is timely as Congress and the administration are currently working to pass major reform bills for federal first responder grant programs. Among the core principles incorporated into both the House and Senate versions (H.R. 1544 and S. 21) are new and stronger federal incentives and directives that promote enhanced regional cooperation at the state and local levels, including through the facilitation and involvement of regional development organizations.

REALITY OF REGIONAL COOPERATION AT LOCAL LEVEL

As concluded in a 2003 report by the Independent Task Force on Emergency Responders, most jurisdictions across the country are neither sufficiently coordinating emergency response disciplines within their areas nor adequately reaching across geopolitical borders to coordinate their efforts with neighboring communities.

Unfortunately, we are reminded time and again that disasters do not track along or respect political boundaries, whether it be the terrorist attacks of September 11th, hurricanes along the East Coast, annual floods in the Midwest or forest fires in the West. When a disaster strikes, effective preparation, coordination and communication among response entities -- from all levels of government, nonprofit agencies and the private sector -- is central to successful response and recovery efforts.

In a general sense, there is an intensifying dialogue at all levels of government about the rationale and the overwhelming benefits of working regionally to strengthen local planning, preparedness and prevention efforts. However, the reality at the grassroots level is often more complex as governmental entities and first responder officials fear losing control, seek to protect their turf, have overlapping responsibilities or simply fail to recognize the benefits of pursuing regional solutions.

NADO's survey generally reinforces previous research findings that the majority of state and local officials, with responsibility for homeland security preparedness, remain slow and resistant to embracing regional approaches. However, the association's most recent work also uncovered a growing portfolio of progressive state and local governments that are pursuing regional strategies to ensure that their communities are prepared, trained and engaged in the event of a disaster.

As showcased across the nation, regional development organizations are uniquely positioned and qualified to coordinate, plan and implement essential homeland security efforts. These activities range from coordinating the integration of first responder communication systems, to managing the GIS data and tools necessary to enhance local decision making, to developing comprehensive response plans, to conducting regional forums.

Regional Council in Florida Coordinates Staff Support for Statewide Training Exercises

After September 11, Florida Governor Jeb Bush created seven Regional Domestic Security Taskforces (RDSTs) to handle all first responder matters. Due to a lack of dedicated staff for the RDSTs, the **Northeast Florida Regional Council**, headquartered in Jacksonville, provided professional staff support to its RDST and coordinated training exercises within their region.

As a result of its proven ability and experience, the Northeast Florida Regional Council was selected in 2003 to run and coordinate seven statewide homeland security training exercises with the involvement of the state's ten other regional planning commissions. In 2005, the state contracted with the Northeast Florida Regional Council to provide ten additional exercises.

According to after-action reports by the US Department of Homeland Security, the designation of an experienced, expert planner from the Northeast Florida Regional Council to orchestrate the training was key to the innovation and success of the exercises. The process facilitated by the regional council helped to build positive working relationships among the crisis and consequence management agencies, testing of major communication systems, testing inter-agency and public-private cooperation during a crisis, and conducting a needs assessment for equipment, training and personnel.

TAPPING INTO THE POTENTIAL OF REGIONAL SOLUTIONS

- **Most local jurisdictions, especially in small metropolitan and rural regions, typically lack by themselves the manpower, expertise, equipment and resources to effectively prevent, prepare and plan for disasters, whether caused by nature or man.**

- **Regional development organizations offer a proven network for state and local officials to overcome these barriers. RDOs help pool limited resources on a regional basis to achieve an economy of scale, and they provide neutral forums for regional conversations on priorities, assets, needs and vulnerabilities.**

- **Regional approaches and strategies recognize and reinforce the reality that terrorist events and natural disasters are insensitive to political turf battles, lines on a map or political party affiliation.**

- **Both chambers of Congress are now on record as endorsing and promoting regional approaches and strategies -- including through the established network of RDOs -- to enhancing the nation's homeland security planning and preparedness activities.**

The **15 regional development organizations in Kentucky,** known as Area Development Districts (ADDs), have contracted with the state's Department of Homeland Security to conduct NIMCAST workshops in 120 counties across the state.

The NIMCAST, an internet based self assessment exercise, must be completed by every county across the nation by the end of fiscal 2005 to set a baseline level of preparedness and response capabilities.

In the spring of 2005, the **Lincoln Trail ADD**, headquartered in Elizabethtown, was approached by the state homeland security office about conducting a pilot workshop in the county of Grayson to help county officials complete NIMCAST questionnaires.

The workshop was unique in the state because it brought together a variety of emergency response entities, including firefighters, police, EMS crews, water authorities, school districts and hospitals.

After the success of the pilot program, the state decided to partner with the other 14 ADDs to replicate the workshop in the remaining 119 counties. The events boast a 98 percent participation rate and, as of August 1, all counties in the state are NIMCAST compliant. A minimal amount of funding was received from the state to support ADD staffers in the field to run the workshops.

SUMMARY OF SURVEY FINDINGS

INTRODUCTION

NADO's inaugural homeland security survey generated responses from 123 regional development organizations covering 37 different states from every geographic region of the nation. This response rate represents 25 percent of the nation's RDOs. The majority of responses came from regions that labeled as either "rural" or "urban-rural mixed." For the purposes of the results, the term "regional development organization" (RDO) refers to sub-state regional entities such as councils of government, regional planning commissions, local development districts, economic development districts, area development districts and regional development commissions.

SETTING THE STAGE: DEFINING A REGIONAL APPROACH

The state of Texas is frequently highlighted as the model for a regional approach to homeland security due to the Governor's decision to utilize the state's existing network of regional development organizations for statewide planning, training and funding distribution decisions. Although Texas was an originator of this model, it is not the only state today which approaches homeland security planning and training efforts in this common sense manner.

According to the NADO survey, a growing collection of state agencies are contracting with and involving RDOs in emerging homeland security initiatives and the more traditional emergency management tasks. The survey found that state agencies in Connecticut, Florida, Iowa, Indiana, Kentucky, Massachusetts, Mississippi, New Hampshire, Oklahoma, South Carolina, Vermont and Wisconsin have established contracts or agreements either statewide or with individual RDOs to perform specific homeland security services and tasks.

In several cases, states have adopted other variations of regional approaches to homeland security, rather than using the existing regional planning agencies and their geographic boundaries. These states include Connecticut, Florida, Iowa, Massachusetts, Mississippi, Missouri, Pennsylvania, South Carolina and Washington. Even though these states formed new regional entities or coalitions, according to the NADO survey, most of the states are still involving or relying heavily on RDOs for administrative support, professional planning and technical assistance.

In Iowa, for example, six new regions were set up to facilitate state and local planning efforts. While the boundaries and participants for the new regions are distinct from the RDO regions, one of the new regional entities designated an RDO as their fiscal and administrative agent. After September

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CONGRESSIONAL LANGUAGE ON REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT ORGANIZATIONS

The Congress and administration are currently working together to adopt a major reform package for the nation's first responder grant programs. In the fall of 2005, House and Senate leaders will be working to reconcile differences in the two companion bills (H.R. 1544 and S. 21). As passed in each chamber, both bills recognize the value and benefit of state and local officials tapping into the expertise and capacity of the national network of regional development organizations.

The Senate committee report (S. Rpt. 109-71 to S. 21) states:

> "The Committee recognizes that there is a long-standing, well established network of councils of governments, regional planning commissions, regional planning organizations, development districts and other multi-purpose associations of local governments that have the capability and expertise necessary to coordinate regional emergency response plans. The composition of these entities varies widely. These organizations, collectively known as Regional Councils, are multi-purpose, multi-jurisdictional public organizations created by local governments to respond to Federal and State programs. Many of them are bi-state or even tri-state and are officially recognized in the states and localities they serve. Regional Councils have a long history of working with each other on projects that cross regions and cross state lines. Having more than 40 years of experience in planning economic development, disaster recovery, and transportation and infrastructure analysis, they serve as conveners that bring together the public, private, and civic sectors. These Regional Councils may already be in a unique position to fill a void in planning and coordinating homeland security plans across jurisdictional boundaries while providing an unbiased and apolitical environment capable of analyzing needs based on merit alone without creating another layer of government bureaucracy. The Committee urges the Department to fully utilize Regional Councils in the grant-making process."

The House committee report (H.Rpt 109-65 to H.R. 1544) states:

> "The Committee believes that the sharing of resources, training, planning, personnel, and equipment among neighboring jurisdictions through mutual aid agreements and regional cooperation enhances our Nation's terrorism preparedness. Such regional cooperation— both intra- and inter-State—should be supported, where appropriate, through grants from the Department. The Committee is encouraged by the long-standing, well-established network of intra and inter-State regional entities. Indeed, many multi-jurisdictional councils of governments, regional planning commissions and organizations, development districts, and consortiums have responsibility for implementing emergency response plans and coordinating cross-jurisdictional response capabilities. The Committee urges the Department to support the continued development of such intra and inter-State entities."

"The Committee recognizes that there is a long-standing, well established network of councils of governments, regional planning commissions, regional planning organizations, development districts and other multi-purpose associations of local governments that have the capability and expertise necessary to coordinate regional emergency response plans."

11th, the state of Florida created seven new Regional Domestic Security Taskforces to handle all first responder matters. Arizona followed suit by creating five new planning entities called Regional Advisory Councils. Each of these regional groups craft a regional homeland security strategy and make recommendations to the governor on how it wants to use a portion of the state's homeland security funding.

ACTIVITIES OF REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT ORGANIZATIONS

Building on the proven flexibility and broad skills of regional development organizations, states across the country are tapping into them for a variety of services and tasks, according to the NADO survey. These activities range from providing a neutral forum for state and local officials to network on a regional basis to coordinating and managing full scale training exercises to providing comprehensive reviews of equipment, training and personnel needs.

Out of 123 survey respondents, 22 RDOs in the states of Connecticut, Georgia, Indiana, Iowa, Kentucky, Massachusetts, Mississippi, Oklahoma, Texas and Vermont indicated that one of their primary responsibilities under their partnership is to provide a regional forum for local officials and first responders to have an interactive dialogue.

This is followed by 18 survey participants representing the states of Connecticut, Indiana, Kentucky, Massachusetts, Mississippi, Texas and Vermont taking a leadership role in conducting needs assessments of regional first responder training, equipment and vulnerabilities. The task of coordinating first responder training and response exercises has been taken on by several regional development organizations in Massachusetts, South Carolina and Texas.

Local officials have also begun to recognize the importance of utilizing RDOs. Aside from state government initiatives, survey participants from Florida, Georgia, Indiana, Iowa, Missouri, North Carolina, North Dakota, Oklahoma, Texas, Vermont and Virginia indicated that they currently have contracts with individual local governments within their regions to provide support on homeland security initiatives. The services differ slightly from those performed for state agencies. Out of 123 survey participants, 58 percent indicated their primary responsibilities at the local level are to provide regional GIS data collection and analysis services. This is followed closely with 57 percent of participants being tasked with the development of regional response plans.

Oftentimes regional development organizations are involved in formal agreements at both the state and local levels. Out of the 30 survey respondents who have formal contracts with the state, 10 regions in Indiana, Oklahoma, Texas and Vermont indicated they also have contracts with local governments within their regions to provide various homeland security services.

Texas Governor Turns to COGs

In June 2002, the Governor of Texas requested that all 24 regional development organizations in the state (best known in the state as regional councils of government) develop regional homeland security plans as part of a comprehensive statewide planning initiative. The process used by the **Capital Area Council of Governments**, headquartered in Austin, offers a good illustration of the process and outcomes.

The RDO's staff first met with representatives from all 10 counties within its region, collected relevant data and facilitated the development of a regional response and preparedness plan. The planning process incorporated the identification of priorities and needs for subsequent rounds of federal and state grant cycles. The RDO then formed a 24-member task force with representation from throughout the region. The group assists staff in the preparation of regional homeland security plans, discusses regional issues, evaluates and makes recommendations on grant applications and shares best practices. The Capital Area COG staff and contractors provide assistance to all eligible jurisdictions that wish to complete the Domestic Preparedness Assessment, a comprehensive web-based local assessment tool developed by the US Department of Homeland Security's Office of Domestic Preparedness. The completed assessments serve as applications for federal first responder and equipment funding for each eligible jurisdiction.

As a result of expanded federal directives and mandates in the late 1990s and early part of the current decade, an increasing number of RDOs are engaged in more traditional emergency management activities. Most notably, RDOs from 27 states responded that they prepared the federally-mandated all-hazard mitigation plans for local governments within their region. RDOs typically provide professional support and technical assistance for local governments as they attempt to manage and navigate grant applications for federal and state grant programs. In fact, 107 survey participants indicated they maintained some of the more traditional emergency management functions in their region in the past three years, including staffing local emergency management committees. Twenty two percent of respondents are active participants in FEMA's Cooperating Technical Partners Program (CTPP) as part of the agency's flood map modernization effort.

All-Hazard Mitigation Plans Drafted by RDOs

Alabama
Arizona
Arkansas
Connecticut
Florida
Georgia
Kentucky
Indiana
Iowa
Maine
Michigan
Minnesota
Mississippi
Missouri
New Hampshire
North Carolina
North Dakota
Oklahoma
South Carolina
South Dakota
Tennessee
Texas
Utah
Vermont
Virginia
West Virginia
Wisconsin

INTERGOVERNMENTAL AND REGIONAL COOPERATION

The level of coordination between local government and first responder groups remains a barrier to regional planning efforts, according to the NADO survey. Out of 123 respondents, 58 percent indicated that local governments and first responders are "somewhat" or "not at all" effectively working across jurisdictional borders to address homeland security planning needs within their region.

The receipt of federal homeland security funding is contingent upon states completing, and DHS approving, statewide homeland security plans. Under federal guidelines, each state's comprehensive plan should involve the active participation and input of local governments. However, nearly 30 percent reported that

Case Studies at a Glance

The **South Carolina Appalachian Council of Governments**, headquartered in Greenville, has conducted Weapons of Mass Destruction /Terrorism Awareness training for more than 1200 first responders across six counties of South Carolina since 2002. The awareness-level course is based upon a DHS lesson plan and is designed to familiarize first responders with radiological, chemical, biological and conventional weapons of mass destruction. The training program is co-sponsored by the South Carolina Department of Health and Environmental Control and offered free of charge to emergency first responders. Graduates of the training course are awarded DHS training certificates. The group recently expanded its training to cover the federal NIMS requirements.

The 12 regional development organizations in Vermont, known as Regional Planning Commissions in the state, are providing valuable professional assistance to the local emergency planning committees. Working with the Bennington County Local Emergency Planning Committee, the **Bennington County Regional Commission (BCRC)** held a table top exercise designed to use the regional emergency plan to test interagency communications, including notification of agencies of an event. The exercise included fire, police, EMS agencies, the Red Cross, the state Department of Health and other agencies. After the exercise, the BCRC evaluated the effectiveness of the planning process. Participants were asked to report on their actions during the exercise, as well as provide any post-event comments. The groups met three weeks after the exercise to debrief and to identify the strengths of the exercise and areas where improvements are needed.

The **Tri-County Regional Planning Commission**, headquartered in Lansing, Michigan, expanded its traditional disaster mitigation planning by taking an all-hazards approach. This included the consideration of bombings, civil disturbances and hazardous material spills. Tri-County prepared the plans for all three of its counties, taking into consideration individual differences in the counties while developing a common response strategy for hazardous incidents. The RDO turned the planning document into a training and educational tool, using CDs for each of its counties and emergency responders in the counties.

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The **Mid-America Regional Council (MARC)** is currently administering over $40 million in federal homeland security funding to coordinate the Kansas City region's work with public agencies and private sector partners. MARC's homeland security work builds on a history of over 30 years supporting the region's 9-1-1 program, and coordination with hazardous materials response, pre-hospital care with emergency medical services, and in disaster planning and recovery. The homeland security work includes developing plans and protocols for regional response, enhancing specialty team capabilities, designing new technology systems for information sharing and communications, GIS coordination, and a one-stop regional training and exercise program.

In December 2004, the **Central Mississippi Planning and Development District**, headquartered in Jackson, entered into a three-year contract with the Hinds County Emergency Operations Center (EOC) to assist them with all their federal homeland security planning requirements. The Hinds County EOC has been designated as the lead agency for a nine county region and CMPDD's services will be for all nine counties. CMPDD will assist with the implementation of the overall state homeland security strategy including: updating and developing new plans associated with the designated Response Team including, operational area strategic plans and assessments, and implementing and managing programs for equipment acquisition, training and exercises.

their state's process for involving local governments in statewide homeland security planning activities remained undefined and 41 percent said it was only "somewhat" effective. When given the opportunity to provide general comments, a common observation among survey respondents was that states were often reluctant, or in some cases unwilling, to involve local government officials.

According to survey respondents the primary method that is used to solicit the input and participation of local government officials in statewide homeland security activities is through direct formal communications with local officials in the form of contracts, agreements or meetings.

NEEDS OF SMALL TOWN AND RURAL AMERICA

The most pressing homeland security need in small metropolitan and rural areas, according to an overwhelming majority of survey respondents, is the need to provide incentives for regional cooperation among local jurisdictions. The need to provide interoperable communications equipment was sited as a second priority, with critical infrastructure security ranking a close third. Survey participants also placed an importance on training for first responders and obtaining new and updated first responder equipment.

While small town and rural America only encompasses nearly one-third of the nation's population, these communities are home to some of the nation's most vulnerable assets: water supplies, dams, power plants, military installations, hazardous materials, agricultural enterprises and other high-threat targets.

Nearly one-third of survey participants feel that the US Department of Homeland Security (DHS) has not adequately addressed the specific vulnerabilities, limitations and needs of small metropolitan and rural areas through either special grant programs or funding distribution formulas. This is compared with only two survey respondents who reported that DHS is performing an exceptional job of reaching out to rural America and addressing its diverse needs.

FEDERAL NIMS GUIDELINES

It is becoming increasingly important that first responders and local jurisdictions across the nation achieve a baseline level of preparedness and response capabilities. In March 2004, the Bush administration unveiled its new approach to incident management and preparedness.

The National Incident Management System (NIMS) is an attempt to provide a common framework for training, communication, information sharing and other preparedness efforts that can be applied at the federal, state and local levels. DHS is encouraging state and local governments to begin to integrate NIMS policies and procedures into their hazard mitigation plans. More importantly, the failure of state and local entities to comply with NIMS standards by fiscal year 2007 will affect their future federal funding assistance levels.

The key to successful "NIMS compliance" at the state and local levels will be the ability of DHS to effectively convey to local jurisdictions the additional preparedness requirements that the program will require. Only 25 percent of respondents felt their local officials were "very aware" or "aware" of federal NIMS directives, while 50 percent were thought to be only "somewhat aware" or "not at all aware." Therefore, there remains a need for additional outreach on these important requirements.