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TOPOFF 3 EXERCISE LESSON LEARNED

Homeland Security Advisory System, State Threat Conditions, and Associated Protective Measures: Coordinating Protective Measures under Changing Advisory System Levels

LESSON LEARNED

The absence of a mechanism for coordinating the implementation of protective measures under changing Homeland Security Advisory System (HSAS) levels contributed to an uncoordinated response.

BACKGROUND

President George W. Bush signed Homeland Security Presidential Directive (HSPD)-3, which created the HSAS to improve coordination and communication in the event of a threat of terrorist attacks. According to HSPD-3, the HSAS is meant to “disseminate information regarding the risk of terrorist acts to federal, state, and local authorities and to the American people.” The HSAS has two stated purposes. First, it informs federal, state, and local governments and the public of the perceived credibility and imminence of threats. Second, it directs a systematic, coordinated governmental response to such threats to reduce vulnerability or to increase response capability. The system uses colors (from green to red) to define threat conditions from “Low” to “Severe.”

The HSAS is “intended to create a common vocabulary, context, and structure for an ongoing national discussion about the nature of the threats that confront the homeland and the appropriate measures that should be taken in response.” Whereas the HSAS defines the general threat conditions across a risk spectrum, HSPD-3 directs federal agencies and departments to develop and implement protective measures appropriate to each threat condition. The general HSAS guidelines for protective measures that federal agencies should consider under condition Red, or “Severe Risk of Terrorist Attacks,” include the following:

- Increase or redirect personnel to address critical emergency needs;
- Assign emergency response personnel and pre-position and mobilize specially trained teams or resources;

About this Lesson Learned

The Department of Homeland Security (DHS) has not cleared the TOPOFF 3 After-Action Report (AAR) for release. DHS has allowed *LLIS.gov* to extract this and other Lessons Learned from the AAR. *LLIS.gov* has retained as much of the original text as possible and made only minor changes. For more information about the exercise scenario and to view all the *LLIS.gov* TOPOFF 3 Lessons Learned, please see the [TOPOFF 3 Full-Scale Exercise Lessons Learned Report](#).



- Monitor, redirect, or constrain transportation systems; and
- Close public and government facilities.

The HSAS is only binding for the executive branch of the federal government. However, HSPD-3 encourages governors, mayors, and other leaders to review their organizations and to assign protective measures to the threat conditions in a manner consistent with that of the federal government. Some state and local governments have adopted threat advisory systems based upon the HSAS, with specific security measures to be implemented under each of the color codes. Both Connecticut and New Jersey have a threat alert system that is coordinated with the HSAS. State and local governments can raise their threat conditions independently of the federal government. The TOPOFF 3 (T3) full-scale exercise (FSE) did not have scripted elevations of the HSAS or state threat conditions. The exercise began with the HSAS and participating state (New Jersey and Connecticut) advisory systems at Yellow (“Elevated”).

ANALYSIS

In the T3 FSE, there did not appear to be a formal mechanism for coordinating and tracking the implementation of federal, state, local, and private sector protective measures. This may have contributed to the inconsistent application of some measures in the T3 FSE. For example, when New Jersey elevated the state threat level to Red, highway travel in and around the state was restricted to essential emergency personnel and supplies to facilitate response operations and to prevent the spread of plague. However, airports and ports in New Jersey remained open even after the Department of Homeland Security elevated the HSAS threat level to Red for the state. This could have been problematic for a number of reasons. This arrangement permitted passengers and cargo to arrive in New Jersey by ship or plane, but prohibited either from leaving the airport or port facility. It could also have resulted in conflicting messages to the public.

Officials provided little guidance regarding what constituted “essential” in these cases. Some emergency operations center (EOC) personnel in New Jersey expressed concern that the restrictions might apply to their personnel, thus preventing them from reporting to the EOC for duty. There is no evidence that instructions were provided to New Jersey State Troopers or local police on how to identify authorized travelers. Further, essential medical or other personnel outside the state of New Jersey did not receive instructions regarding the credentialing they would need to cross the state border and to travel unimpeded while the travel restrictions remained in effect.

The DHS lead sector coordinator for the healthcare sector believed that implementation of movement restrictions could apply to transport of food and water. This could have had an immediate and significant impact on healthcare operations in New Jersey by delaying deliveries. Additionally, the restrictions on interstate road travel could have caused severe traffic congestion along the entire East coast as traffic was diverted around the state of New Jersey. Absent more comprehensive and coordinated implementation planning, these restrictions, which were intended to facilitate response efforts, could have severely hampered the movement of necessities into the state.

RECOMMENDED COURSES OF ACTION

- Develop a formal process for coordinating and tracking implementation of Red (“Severe”) protective measures across federal, state, and local government agencies and the private sector.

- Build a database of measures that can be sorted by threat and by agency to help top officials select the measures best aligned with a given scenario.

SOURCE

US Department of Homeland Security, Federal Emergency Management Agency, National Exercise Division. *Top Officials 3 After-Action Report*. Oct 2005.

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