



DHS Unity of Effort: Homeland Security Issues in the 116th Congress

March 8, 2019

An unresolved debate dating from the origin of the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) is the extent of department management involvement in the functioning of departmental components. Some policy experts supported a strong management function, which would replace the leadership of the components, while others supported a limited management function that allowed DHS components to function freely in their areas of expertise, much as they had before.

Once the department was established in 2003, it became clear that a small management cadre could not provide adequate coordination of policy or oversight of the department. The benefits of coordinated action by a large organization, including setting operational and budgetary priorities, were being lost due to the lack of a capable management cadre with the capacity to manage the department's diverse missions. As its components continued to perform their missions, the department undertook efforts to establish a unified identity and way of doing business. The term "One DHS" was used to describe these initiatives under Tom Ridge, the first Secretary of DHS, and the efforts continued through secretaries Michael Chertoff and Janet Napolitano.

On April 22, 2014, Jeh Johnson, the fourth secretary of DHS, issued a memorandum to DHS leadership, entitled "[Strengthening Departmental Unity of Effort](#)." This now-widely circulated memorandum set out an agenda to reform the Department of Homeland Security's way of doing business by implementing new analytical and decisionmaking processes to develop strategy, plan, and identify joint requirements across multiple department components. These would bring component leadership together above the component level to ensure unity of effort across the department.

Secretary Johnson described it this way in a *Federal Times* [interview](#):

We've embarked on a unity of effort initiative that promotes greater coordination among departments, greater centralized decision-making at headquarters, a more strategic approach to our budget building process, a more strategic departmentwide approach to our acquisition strategy. It is clearly a balance. Within the Department of Homeland Security there are components that long predated the Department of Homeland Security. And so what we are not asking components to do is to all act and behave together. They are distinct cultures.... But what we are asking and expecting our component leadership to do is participate with us in a more strategic approach to promote greater

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IN11069

efficiency in how we operate, how we conduct ourselves, particularly in our budget process and in our acquisitions.

The memorandum laid out four areas of initial focus.

1. The first was to bring together senior leaders of the department in two groups: a Senior Leaders Council to discuss “overall policy, strategy, operations and Departmental guidance,” and a Deputies Management Action Group (DMAG) to “advance joint requirements development, program and budget review, acquisition reform, operational planning, and joint operations.”
2. The second area was to make improvements to the departmental management processes for investments. Specifically, incorporating strategic analysis and joint requirements planning into the annual budget development process, directing the DMAG to develop and facilitate a component-driven joint requirements process, and reviewing and updating the DHS acquisition oversight framework.
3. The third was developing a stronger strategy, planning, and analytic capability within the Office of Policy.
4. The fourth was to improve coordination of cross-component operations.

Bipartisan and bicameral support for these reforms was shown in several hearings during the 113th and 114th Congresses. Both [House](#) and [Senate](#) Appropriations Committee reports have included language supportive of the department’s managerial reorganization, although there has been [concern expressed about keeping Congress informed](#) about progress and consequences of reorganizations in the field.

Several of the action items included in the memorandum were completed in 2014, such as the establishment of a Cost Analysis Division in the Office of the Chief Financial Officer in May 2014. The role of this division is to ensure life-cycle cost estimates are part of major acquisition plans. DHS also completed development of a Southern Border and Approaches Campaign Plan—a four-year strategic framework for joint operations securing the southern border of the United States.

In 2015, DHS implemented a [Unity of Effort Award](#), presented by the Secretary, recognizing “outstanding efforts to significantly improve efficiency and effectiveness across the U.S. Department of Homeland Security,” specifically noting contributions to the unity of effort initiative.

At the end of the 114th Congress, [Title XIX of the FY2017 National Defense Authorization Act](#) provided specific statutory authority to DHS for certain activities connected with the Unity of Effort initiative, including authorizing joint task forces and redefining the role of the former Office of Policy and renaming it the Office of Strategy, Policy, and Plans.

At the [confirmation hearing](#) for General John Kelly, interest in management reform and the future of Johnson’s Unity of Effort initiative was apparent, with both [General Kelly](#) and some [Senators](#) praising the progress that had been made. However, Secretary Kelly’s six-month tenure at the department was largely devoted to other issues. Then-Deputy Secretary Elaine Duke, after a six-month tenure as Acting Secretary, noted in early 2018 that [the border security mission at DHS was one where the unity of effort initiative was maturing](#), as components worked together to accomplish their missions. Secretary Kirstjen Nielsen, who assumed the post in December 2017, indicated in her [pre-confirmation questionnaire](#) that she intended “to assess the effectiveness of current unity of effort programs and processes and strengthen them where needed,” highlighting interest in “integrating and leveraging” capabilities and promoting joint education and training.

Congress may debate the appropriate role of departmental management at DHS, the extent of engagement Congress should have as reforms go forward, and the progress of management reforms, including whether they are having the desired effect. Congress may wish to follow up on the Secretary’s priorities as outlined in her questionnaire.

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