

## At Issue: PUBLIC SAFETY AND HOMELAND SECURITY

The security of the United States and its citizens is one of the defining issues of the decade and will likely remain a top concern for the foreseeable future. The threats to America's citizens have changed significantly: transnational crime syndicates have fused with local gangs; disasters pose new and expanding risks to human life and commerce; terrorism, international and domestic, has the potential to destabilize our economy and our communities; and new tactics and tools such as the Internet have made it easier for criminals to extend their reach into communities and homes.

In the face of these new challenges, the leaders of America's cities and towns are best positioned to address traditional public safety needs while at the same time advancing the nation's homeland security priorities. The public safety of citizens is the first and foremost responsibility of local governments. Local governments are the first line of defense—whether deterring petty crime or preparing for the worst possible scenarios.

With this reality in mind, the National League of Cities believes that the next President and Congress must transform our approach to homeland security. National top-down plans are not sufficient. America needs collaborative strategies that emphasize partnerships, innovation, and “all-hazard” approaches to public safety.

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*“Local governments are the first level of government to respond to most disasters and emergencies and must be regarded as the focus point of disaster mitigation and recovery activities.”*

— Audwin Samuel, Councilmember, Beaumont, Texas

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## WHERE WE STAND

An effective homeland security strategy for America requires buy-in not just from both parties or both Congress and the White House, but also from the state and local leaders who provide 80 percent of the nation's funding for public safety in our country's cities and towns.<sup>1</sup>

Security requires ensuring everyone's participation, and that means addressing everyone's safety concerns. According to the International Association of Chiefs of Police, 99,000 Americans have been murdered and 8 million

were victims of violent crime in the years since the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001.<sup>2</sup> Without a goal of “general security” on all fronts for all Americans, it will be hard to achieve the united participation of federal, state, and local authorities required to secure our country.

Fortunately, keeping communities safe and protecting America's national security are complementary goals. Integrating local police into communities through efforts like the Community Oriented Policing Services (COPS)

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<sup>1</sup> In 2002, the last year on record, the Bureau of Justice Statistics reported over \$168 billion in state and local spending on public safety and homeland security. Last year, the federal government provided state and local governments with \$35 billion in criminal justice funding.

<sup>2</sup> To Protect and Defend: Challenges to Public Safety and Homeland Security Facing the Next U.S. President. International Association of Chiefs of Police, 2008.





program improves America's early warning systems by ensuring investigation of suspicious activities that may portend transnational criminal acts. Providing pre-disaster mitigation dollars to communities allows them to better weather disasters; and federal training and equipment upgrades for local fire and rescue personnel save lives by bolstering the first response. Among the results: reductions in the loss of lives and property, and ultimately a reduced need for federal disaster relief funding.

### Three Principles for Promoting Hometown Security

The National League of Cities believes the federal government, in partnership with state and local governments, should focus on three core principles as it steers the nation toward a new paradigm of safety and security.

**Support for bottom-up solutions.** Local communities are best positioned to react quickly, ensuring a local problem does not become a national one. But the ability of local governments to respond decisively to the full spectrum of safety and security challenges they face is at risk. In the years since September 11, 2001, much more has been asked of America's first responders while federal funding for traditional public safety activities have been consistently slashed. This has left local police with a broader responsibility to citizens, but fewer resources and personnel to do what's needed.

Whether they are fighting wildfires or gangs, preventing violent crime or terrorism, or saving citizens from a natural or manmade disaster, local communities can and should lead the way. But they can only do so with the right guidance, collaboration and resources from the federal government. One example of the challenges cities confront in this arena has to do requests for federal assistance in an emergency. The federally-required customary wait of 72 hours after a major disaster to receive any federal assistance hinders the capacity of local governments to save lives and property during a crucial time. Being able to provide as much aid as possible in that initial period benefits the local community and the nation as a whole.

Of course, it's not just aid that cities need; it is also information. America needs stronger domestic intelligence-sharing programs that enable local authorities to access federal and local law enforcement data. Regional "fusion centers" are a promising example of what's possible when local law enforcement has better access to information and intelligence at all levels.

**Emphasize prevention and preparedness.** Whether the problem is violent crime or a major disaster, local vigilance and preparedness increase the odds that governments can eliminate or reduce harm to communities and citizens.

The federal government must refine and further develop its strategy for making our country more resilient against attack and natural disaster. Pre-disaster mitigation grants, which help communities reduce the threat of natural disasters to both lives and property, have been proven to save four dollars for every dollar spent.<sup>3</sup> Protecting infrastructure—from building stronger levees to bolstering our electrical grid—can deter potential attacks while at the same time providing a better chance of a quick recovery. To protect the economy and save lives, identifying our national vulnerabilities and girding them to reduce risk should be one of the foremost missions of the federal government.

Similarly, investing in crime prevention alongside existing enforcement will reduce the long-term costs of crime and violence in American communities, while taking some of the burden and danger away from local public safety personnel. Among the actions cities can take with increased federal support: implementing programs in high-crime communities that create a united front between citizens and police against criminal elements; and providing services to ex-offenders and troubled youth to put them on the right track to a better future.

Successful prevention programs include substance abuse treatment, education services, job placement, and simply providing stable, positive influences in the lives of citizens. The good news is that proven programs in each of these areas exist in many local communities; the federal

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<sup>3</sup> A 2005 congressionally mandated study by the Multi-hazard Mitigation Council (an advisory body of the National Institute of Building Sciences) concluded that cost-effective mitigation saves an average of four dollars for every dollar spent, with flood mitigation yielding even greater savings.



government's role should be expanding, replicating and encouraging them nationally.

**Focus on individual awareness and readiness.** The importance of individual action to protect family, home and community may have been largely forgotten in a post-September 11 culture that sees disasters as problems too big for individuals to address on their own. However, no federal, state, or local government preparedness program can substitute for individuals who are proactive about their own responsibilities in their communities—particularly in times immediately before, during, and after an emergency. Therefore, government at all levels must work together to build a culture of individual action, responsibility, and preparedness.

A mix of distrust in government and mixed signals on disaster preparedness has eroded individual readiness and action. The federal government must recommit to measured, rational education for Americans about their role in ensuring we are prepared for disasters. The federal government also should expand efforts to spur collaboration between local first responders and citizens within a community to prepare for disasters. The resources for this sort of call-to-action do not exist at any other level of government. A culture of preparedness will better allow first responders to deal with those who truly cannot help themselves, while better enabling the general population to act wisely if confronted with an emergency.

Last but not least, the federal government must improve emergency communications and warning systems so people are prepared to act when emergencies do occur. This will require increasing localization of disaster warnings and clear instruction on what citizens must do to protect themselves. While these warnings have significantly improved since Hurricane Katrina, more can still be done to deliver effective and appropriate messages to local government and its citizens at the right times.

## AGENDA FOR THE NATION

**Direct resources where they are needed most.** The National League of Cities believes the federal government must invest in several key areas as it seeks to bolster the capacity of local governments and others to protect the safety and security of America and its citizens. Cities and towns support federal efforts to:

- Provide local governments with the resources to meet the growing demands on local first responders as the linchpin of emergency and disaster response.
- Invest more in disaster prevention and resilience so local communities can identify vulnerabilities and take steps to reduce the loss of lives and property in the event of a disaster.
- Invest more in programs that reduce the long-term incidence and costs of crime, from substance abuse treatment to proven programs that build alliances between citizens and police.

**Strengthen information sharing at all levels.** The National League of Cities believes the federal government can play a crucial role in advancing public safety and homeland security by collecting and sharing information about urgent issues and what works. Cities and towns stand ready to aid federal efforts to:

- Collect information about best practices and model public safety and homeland security programs; and provide local communities with examples that can be tailored to their unique needs and concerns, while also providing direct assistance to implement programs fully and correctly.
- Strengthen domestic intelligence sharing between federal and local authorities on wide-ranging issues from illegal gun sales to terrorist threats.

**Create a culture of public awareness and action.** The National League of Cities believes the federal government also has an important role to play in ensuring that all Americans understand their own responsibilities in preventing crime and preparing for disasters. Cities and towns urge the federal government to:

- Commit to educating the nation in an effort to create a culture of rational community preparedness – so that the general public can act wisely if confronted with an emergency.
- Expand efforts to spur local collaboration between first responders and citizens within a community to prepare for disasters.
- Improve emergency communications and warning systems so citizens have the information they need to protect themselves.



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*“With local law enforcement funds and city budgets constrained by the current economy, we rely on federal, state, and regional partnerships to maximize local efforts to protect families who live and work in America’s cities and towns. Federal participation is crucial to the success of these efforts.”*

— Dan Furtado, Mayor, Campbell, California

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## VISION FOR THE FUTURE

From community policing and disaster mitigation to intelligence sharing and emergency communications, major breakthroughs in securing our nation consistently have come from local leaders. Yet, without federal encouragement and resource sharing, across-the-board progress is impossible. An increased federal role in sharing national best practices and providing funds that encourage local innovation and success must be the basis for any plan to strengthen public safety and homeland security in America. The National League of Cities urges the next President and Congress to work with local leaders to make “hometown security” the foundation of a safer America.

### For more information, contact:

**Mitchel Herckis**

Senior Legislative Counsel  
(202) 626-3124

**Katie Seeger**

Staff Director, Public Safety and  
Crime Prevention Committee  
(202) 626-3131

