



May 12, 2005
(House)

STATEMENT OF ADMINISTRATION POLICY

H.R. 1544 – Faster and Smarter Funding for First Responders Act of 2005

(Rep. Cox (R) California and 40 cosponsors)

The Administration supports House passage of H.R. 1544, which would increase the amount of homeland security assistance distributed based on risk and threat. This approach is consistent with the goals of the President, which are reflected in the President's FY 2006 Budget. The Administration greatly appreciates the Committee's efforts to better target Federal preparedness grants to the Nation's most critical terrorism preparedness needs and to ensure that State and local grantees are held accountable for how these funds are used. However, the Administration has several concerns regarding the specific allocation of funds, the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) grant review process, and new oversight requirements. The Administration looks forward to working with Congress to address these concerns before it completes final action on this legislation.

The Administration appreciates the Committee's support for lowering the minimum State funding levels. The bill proposes three separate minimum funding levels for States and territories, and a separate percentage for direct grants to Indian tribes. The Administration believes this formulation is unduly complicated, and urges the House to adopt the Budget's proposal of a minimum funding level of 0.25 percent for each State and territory.

While the Administration agrees that DHS should leverage the expertise of various components within the Department in assessing State and local needs, it has concerns over the establishment of a new First Responder Grants Board within DHS. Imposing this new bureaucratic layer of grant application review on the Secretary would slow the distribution of homeland security funds to States and localities and limit the Secretary's authority to decide how grant funds should be allocated. Eliminating this provision would enable the Secretary to distribute homeland security funds in an efficient manner consistent with the bill's other requirements.

The Administration appreciates that the Task Force on Terrorism Preparedness for First Responders will build on essential responder capabilities that are being developed for the National Preparedness Goal. However, the complexity of the Task Force's membership requirements would unduly limit the Secretary's ability to exercise discretion over appointments. The Administration urges simplification of these requirements, or making them advisory.

Finally, the Administration has concerns regarding new reporting requirements for both DHS and State and local grantees. The bill would already increase the level of information required as part of the grant planning and application process. Requiring a new series of quarterly and annual reports would further increase the paperwork burden without adding significant oversight benefits. A number of audits have shown no systemic abuse within the grant program administered by DHS's Office of State and Local Government Coordination and Preparedness. The Administration looks forward to working with Congress on specific changes to these reporting requirements.