

July 14, 2003

The Honorable Tom Ridge  
Secretary  
Department of Homeland Security  
Washington, DC 20528

Dear Secretary Ridge:

For months, I and Democratic colleagues have warned that the Administration is dangerously underfunding the war on terrorism here at home. Now, that concern has been independently corroborated by a respected, non-partisan group of experts: a special task force of the Council on Foreign Relations, in its recent report “Drastically Underfunded, Dangerously Unprepared,” concludes that the nation has dramatic vulnerabilities in its homeland defenses and, even worse, is not yet on track to repair these security weaknesses. Yet rather than showing concern about the report’s findings, your Department has dismissed this warning call with the statement that the report’s budget recommendations “seem to be grossly inflated.”<sup>1</sup> I am extremely disturbed that the Department of Homeland Security would brush aside the warning of this distinguished panel, and call upon you to address the urgent substance of this important report.

The Council’s report, released on June 29, 2003, is a vital contribution to the homeland security debate. The Independent Task Force on Emergency Responders was led by two distinguished voices in the war on terrorism – Former Senator Warren Rudman and Richard A. Clarke, a former White House terrorism expert. The task force included experts from numerous fields related to terrorism, including a former director of the CIA and FBI, and a former Secretary of State. The panel reached out to a range of individuals and associations to determine the needs of first responders. To hone its budget recommendations, in particular, the Council task force turned to two respected budget analysis organizations: the Concord Coalition and the Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments. In short, the report is an extremely serious and responsible piece of work that merits our attention.

With respect to funding, the Council task force determined that governments – federal, state and local -- must spend an additional \$98.4 billion over five years beyond current spending to adequately equip and prepare the nation’s first responders. This estimate was based on specific

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<sup>1</sup>John Mintz, “Study: ‘First Responders’ Underfunded,” Washington Post, June 29, 2003, p. A14.

assessments of different sectors of the first responder community. For instance, we have already seen that large buildings are tempting targets for terrorists. Yet the task force determined that major cities, and the federal government, lack sufficient urban search and rescue capacity to respond to a terrorist attack leading to the collapse of a significant building. It calculated that about \$15 billion is needed for this piece alone. The \$98.4 billion in additional spending would also address such critical needs as training and equipping firefighters to respond to an attack using weapons of mass destruction, improving the ability of the public health community to detect and respond to bioterrorism, and purchasing interoperable communications equipment for first responders. Moreover, this estimate does not include some known needs – such as detection or protection gear for police – because the task force could not obtain reliable estimates for those areas.

On what basis, then, does your Department dismiss the need for these additional funds? Please indicate, specifically, what components of the budget recommendations are “grossly inflated” and the basis for that assessment.

Beyond the recommendations concerning the overall level of homeland security funding, the task force identified several other urgent matters if the nation is to improve its preparedness against terrorism.

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Standards: The task force says it is impossible to know precisely what communities need because there are no preparedness standards to specify the essential capabilities that communities should have in order to cope with a significant terrorist attack. It calls on the Administration (through DHS and HHS) to develop such standards, which could then serve as the basis for determining urgent requirements that must be funded as soon as possible.

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Funding logjams: The task force determined that funding logjams are imperiling too much of the money that has been appropriated for first responders. The report cites inflexible and confusing requirements for federal homeland funds that, taken together, pose undue burdens on jurisdictions applying for aid and can stall the distribution of funds that have been approved. In addition to simplifying and expediting the grant process for first responder needs, the task force concludes that more funding must be channeled to high-threat areas.

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Coordination and Best Practices: The task force found that communities were not adequately coordinating their preparedness efforts to achieve the greatest protection. It calls on the federal government to play a leadership role in promoting such coordination, and in disseminating information about best practices to emergency responder communities. Both efforts would allow the nation to achieve greater protection at lesser cost, compared to allowing communities to pursue more ad hoc efforts.

Please indicate whether you agree with these urgent action items. If so, please indicate what steps DHS is taking on each of these key issues, including what timetables exist for implementing changes. If not, please indicate the basis for your disagreement.

I believe the Council task force has performed an invaluable public service in issuing this report. It is yet another wake-up call for all of us charged with furthering this government's fundamental mission – to protect citizens from harm. Only an unflinching assessment of our vulnerabilities and fierce commitment to remedying them will improve our ability to prevent, or respond to, another terrorist attack. I hope you will join me in addressing the urgent counsel of this report, and await your earliest possible response.

Sincerely,

Joseph I. Lieberman  
Ranking Member