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**Government of the District of Columbia**



**Homeland Security and Emergency Management Agency**

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Testimony of  
Darrell L. Darnell, Director

*“You Don’t Know What You Don’t Know: Has the Department of  
Homeland Security Improved its Ability to Maintain Situational  
Awareness Since Hurricane Katrina?”*

**U.S. House of Representatives  
Committee on Homeland Security  
Subcommittee on Management, Investigations and Oversight**

Wednesday, June 20, 2007  
1539 Longworth House Office Building  
Washington, DC 20515  
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Good morning, Chairman Carney and members of the subcommittee. I am Darrell L. Darnell, Director of the District of Columbia Homeland Security and Emergency Management Agency (HSEMA). I'm pleased to have the opportunity to testify before you today about the District of Columbia's perspective on the extent to which the U. S. Department of Homeland Security has improved its ability to maintain situational awareness since Hurricane Katrina as well as the District's efforts to establish and maintain situational awareness and create a common operating picture.

HSEMA's mission is to administer a comprehensive, community-based emergency management program in partnership with residents, businesses and visitors to the District of Columbia. The goal is to save lives, protect property and safeguard the environment.

I have 30 years of military, federal and private sector experience, including positions at the U.S. Department of Justice's Office for Community Oriented Policing Service (COPS), and at the Department's Office for State and Local Domestic Preparedness Support (OSLDPS). I also have served as Director of the U. S. Department of Homeland Security's (DHS) Headquarters Operational Integration Staff's Preparedness Division. Additionally, I was a 2006 Senior Fellow at the George Washington University Homeland Security Policy Institute.

Since assuming leadership of HSEMA on March 19 of this year, I have been involved in a broad range of activities, including strengthening relationships with community leaders and members of the private sector as well as continuing to work with our regional and federal partners to ensure that the District and all of the stakeholders in the National Capital Region (NCR) maintain the level of cooperation and collaboration that has enabled us to successfully address the myriad public safety and preparedness issues we face in the NCR.

### **Collaboration and Coordination in the National Capital Region**

The National Capital Region is composed of the District of Columbia; Montgomery and Prince Georges counties in Maryland; Arlington, Fairfax, Loudoun and Prince William counties in Virginia; and all cities in Maryland or Virginia within those counties.

In the almost six years since the terrorist attacks on the Pentagon and the World Trade Center, the District and the NCR have worked together along with our federal partners to ensure that our city and our region are among the most prepared in the nation. We have recognized the unique challenges resulting from living in our target-rich region and we have responded by implementing planning, training and exercise activities that bring together District, federal, state and local government entities to create a coordinated prevention, protection, response and recovery structure.

In August 2002, the U.S. Office of Homeland Security, the Mayor of the District of Columbia and the governors of Maryland and Virginia convened a homeland security summit to bring together local, state, regional and national leaders in the NCR to announce eight commitments to action that had been developed and agreed upon by senior-level federal officials, the mayor and the two governors.

The eight commitments are:

- Citizen involvement in preparedness;
- Decision-making and coordination;
- Emergency protective measures;
- Infrastructure protection;
- Media relations and communication;

- Mutual aid;
- Terrorism prevention; and
- Training and exercises.

In the five years since the summit, the NCR and its federal partners have been successful in realizing many of the goals outlined in these commitments. Of particular relevance to today's discussion is commitment two: decision-making and coordination.

The uniqueness of the NCR demands coordination among a large city, two states, multiple local jurisdictions and the three branches of the federal government. For the District, which functions as a city, a state and a county, this means developing coordination between the District and its neighboring states of Maryland and Virginia, between the District and the multiple jurisdictions of the NCR as well as between the District and the multiple federal agencies located within the city. This routine, systematic collaboration is essential to the NCR on a day-to-day basis and absolutely critical to successful response to a major event on the scale of Hurricane Katrina.

As part of the NCR commitment to collaboration and coordination, the NCR leaders established a Senior Policy Group to lead decision-making and coordination between local and state governments, as well as the federal government. This group works with the region's Chief Administrative Officers, who represent local government leadership, to provide a coordinated and institutionalized process for defining and meeting needs across the region.

Specific to situational awareness, the Council of Governments' Emergency Managers Committee established a subcommittee known as the NCR Operations Center Coordination Group in August 2006. In addition to the NCR jurisdictions, current membership includes DHS and the Department of Defense's U.S. Army Military District of Washington/Commander, Joint Force Headquarters-National Capital Region. Through this standing body, the practitioners at the state, local and federal levels regularly seek ways to enhance information sharing and collaboration. Since the technological impediments to information sharing have largely been conquered, this body has turned its attention to establishing common agreements between Emergency Operations Centers (EOCs) about what is expected in an incident and ensuring verification and dissemination processes.

This subcommittee and other bodies have worked continuously to achieve the ultimate goal of this systematic, day-to-day coordination: situational awareness that leads to a common operating picture among all key stakeholders. As such, achieving and maintaining situational awareness has been an area of focused, dedicated effort since 2002. In 2005, Hurricane Katrina provided an unnecessary reminder of the criticality of the efforts to routinely share information to establish a common operating picture. Similarly, we have worked with our federal partners to avoid situations where errant aircraft may be shot down within the District borders but District officials not notified and where federal facilities such as the Capitol are evacuated without notification of District officials. While isolated incidents have proved a challenge, on the whole, the District, the National Capital Region and DHS have made great progress toward the goal of achieving and maintaining situational awareness.

### **Achieving Situational Awareness**

The District of Columbia employs a number of interconnected systems to achieve and maintain situational awareness and establish a common operating picture with its regional partners, including the federal government. As a starting point, information flows into EOCs through 911 systems and a variety of other methods, including a system that has been adapted from a civil defense application to natural hazard and terrorism warning and alerts. The National Warning

System (NAWAS), a 24-hour continuous private line telephone system that links federal, state and local EOCs, was developed in the 1950s to warn of an imminent enemy attack or accidental missile launch on the U.S. NAWAS is now used routinely to convey information about natural and man-made hazards as well as to coordinate responses to day-to-day events.

NAWAS is comprised of segments, and the local portion is known as WAWAS, the Washington Area Warning System. DC's Homeland Security and Emergency Management Agency serves as the network control for all users in the NCR and coordinates all requests for the addition of warnings to the system. As such, the District serves as both a hub and conduit of information between and among states and jurisdictions across the nation as well as the federal government. HSEMA—and the surrounding states, jurisdictions and federal partners—use WAWAS on a daily basis, demonstrating its worth while simultaneously preparing every day for an event as devastating as Hurricane Katrina.

Another piece of the puzzle—and one implemented after August 2005—is a tool designed to achieve a common operating picture among diverse agencies and jurisdictions called WebEOC. All of the NCR jurisdictions, as well as several dozen federal partners—including DHS's FEMA, the U.S. Secret Service, and the Coast Guard—have joined the network and are able to quickly and easily share real-time information. WebEOC users have the option to post information relevant to the region to a common page that participant EOCs can see. This system is the primary vehicle for sharing information and achieving situational awareness in the National Capital Region on a daily basis.

While WebEOC is used throughout the region for day-to-day operations, it can provide a specific forum for collaboration during a major event. Specific agencies and jurisdictions are granted access to a customized site where event-specific information is exchanged among those with a need to know, enhancing capability while protecting sensitive information.

Expanding beyond the EOCs, information is shared widely through the Regional Incident Communication and Coordination System (RICCS), which is used to provide immediate text notification and update information during a major crisis or emergency to those not physically located in an EOC. RICCS provides alerts, notifications, and updates via email, cell phone, pager, and wireless device. RICCS ensures that situational awareness is not limited to those in command centers and, by including key players in the field, broadens the exchange of information.

An additional, crucial element of situational awareness is public messaging. Because of the unique relationship between the National Capital Region and the federal government, managing public information in a way that ensures adherence to the joint information system is essential. Regional Emergency Support Function 15 (RESF-15) includes public information officers from NCR jurisdictions as well as representatives from DHS and other regional stakeholders such as Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority (WMATA), the American Red Cross and the Board of Trade.

The DHS Office of Public Affairs has provided RESF-15 members with key contact information and initial emergency coordination procedures for use during incidents and emergencies of all types. Additionally, Public Information Officers (PIOs) have access to the State Incident Communications Conference Line (SICCL), an emergency line maintained by DHS to share public information with all states.

As part of the effort to promote a unified public message throughout the region, members of RESF-15 have created a virtual joint information system that allows them to share information and formulate messages collectively so that the goal of “one message, many voices” is achieved.

Finally, the District is in the process of establishing a fusion center for information sharing and analysis. The ultimate goal of the fusion center will be to provide a mechanism where law enforcement, public safety and private partners can come together with a common purpose and improve the ability to safeguard our homeland and prevent criminal activity. By routinely analyzing disparate pieces of information, the fusion center will be a major contributor to enhanced situational awareness and achieving a common operating picture. Integral to the success of the District’s fusion center is close, regular collaboration with existing fusion centers in our partner jurisdictions in the National Capital Region as well as with DHS’s National Operations Center.

### **Working with DHS**

The response to Hurricane Katrina exposed a number of areas for improvement at all levels—federal, state and local—even for those of us who were only tangentially involved. Since that time, we have worked closely with DHS to close gaps and improve upon existing prevention, protection, response and recovery protocols. In the effort to work closely with DHS to embrace the lessons learned from Hurricane Katrina, three successes stand out: full staffing of personnel in FEMA Region III and in the Federal Coordinating Officers (FCO) corps as well as the ongoing revisions to the National Response Plan.

In *The Federal Response To Hurricane Katrina: Lessons Learned*, the White House recommends: “Below the headquarters level within DHS, we must build up the Department’s regional structures...Homeland security regional offices should be the means to foster State, local and private sector integration.” To that end, we in the National Capital Region have been pleased to see FEMA’s Region III headquarters fully staffed and have a full complement of FCOs. We have been working closely with our DHS partners to refine plans and procedures and ensure that our staffs are trained appropriately and are participating in regular exercises.

Since August 2006, DC HSEMA has participated in four exercises with DHS that have included enhancing situational awareness and achieving a common operating picture as primary objectives. These exercises include:

- FEMA Region III Hurricane Exercise – May 2006
- TOPOFF 4 Command Post Exercise – June 2006
- Tactical Communication Interoperability Plan (TCIP) Exercise – September 2006
- NCR Regional Response 07 – April 2007

These exercises all proved worthwhile and we look forward to continued national-level training and exercise opportunities.

### **Areas for Improvement**

While we have noticed improvements since the National Operations Center (NOC) was established to coordinate and integrate the national response and provide a common operating picture, we believe there is still room for progress. One of the early challenges in homeland security in general, and with situational awareness in particular, was the lack of information flow between the federal government and the state and local governments. The dearth of information most acutely affected the District, as the seat of the federal government, and the National Capital Region, as the

home of numerous federal agencies. While the reluctance to share information is gradually being overcome, we are now facing a different challenge: that of information redundancy. We often receive information from multiple sources within DHS, which can lead to information overload.

Since the initial—and arguably most difficult—aspect of the information-sharing challenge has been addressed, we are looking forward to working with our federal partners to establish guidelines and protocols to streamline the flow of information. Minimizing redundancy and ensuring the accuracy of the information are essential, while vetting it and reducing duplication before dissemination are ongoing goals.

While achieving situational awareness relies heavily upon established personal relationships, practiced policies and procedures, we are all dependent upon technology to enable efficient and effective information sharing. To that end, it would be helpful for DHS to continue to work toward establishing guidelines and criteria for interoperable communications technology. While the Authorized Equipment List (AEL) and the Standardized Equipment List (SEL) are useful tools, an evaluation of continually evolving technology—a Consumer Reports-like approach—would be invaluable. Further, this availability of guidelines and resultant research and analysis would encourage consumers at the state and local levels to invest in technology that enables interoperability between and among jurisdictions, states and the federal government.

I thank you for this opportunity to appear before you today on this important issue and am available for any questions you may have.