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Biological Warfare: Federal Agency Responsibilities

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13 November 2007

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Introduction

United States Department of Homeland Security (DHS) is assigned the task to protect and react to Biological attacks on the United States, but other local, state and federal agencies are not preparing through training based on the unlikely threats of attacks and lack of funds and resources. On February 11, 2004, President George W. Bush stated “Armed with a single vial of a biological agent...small groups of fanatics, or failing states, could gain the power to threaten great nations, threaten the world peace. America, and the entire civilized world, will face this threat for decades to come. We must confront the danger with open eyes, and unbending purpose. “ (Biodefense for the 21st Century).

Preventing and controlling future biological weapons threats is challenging and will become even more challenging with advances in biotechnology and life sciences. The stakes could not be higher for our nation. Attacks with biological weapons could cause catastrophic numbers of casualties, long term disease and disability, psychological trauma, mass panic, disrupt critical sectors of our economy, create cascading international effects by disrupting and damaging international trade relationships. Fortunately, the United States is well prepared by mounting credible biodefenses. We have aggressively pursued a broad range of programs and capabilities to confront the biological weapons threat. We have conducted a comprehensive evaluation of our biological defense capabilities to identify future priorities and actions to support them. Specific direction to departments and agencies to carry out this biodefense program is contained in a classified version of the directive, Biodefense for the 21st Century.

As already stated, Department of Homeland security has overall responsibility for the training, managing, and responding to all biological attacks within the United States. In the Biodefense for the 21st Century, the thought out procedures and reactions are spelled out. The United States will use all necessary means to prevent, protect against and mitigate biological weapons attacks against our homeland and global interests. Department of Homeland Security and other federal agencies augment private, local and state capabilities to provide layered defenses against all biological attacks.

The pillars of our biodefense program that the Department of Homeland Security has over watch on are: Threat Awareness, Prevention and Protection, Surveillance and Detection, and Response and Recovery. In order for this to be successful, they must optimize critical cross cutting functions such as information management and communication, research development, creation and maintenance of needed biodefense infrastructure, including the human capital to support it, public preparedness and strengthened bilateral, multilateral and international cooperation.

The Secretary of Homeland Security is the principal Federal official for domestic incident management and is responsible for coordinating Federal operations to prepare for, respond to, and recover from biological weapons attacks. The Secretary of Homeland Security coordinates with the heads of other Federal departments and agencies to effectively accomplish this mission.

Their mission is the planner. They conduct all the planning for these types of attacks and coordinate with local, state and federal agencies to respond. Their plans are great on paper, but trying to get all the other organizations in sync proves to be the hardest based off funding, time available for preparation, practice and overall response. The main problem is identifying or forecasting where a biological attack will take place in order to prepare that region.

The Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) takes weapons of mass destruction (WMD) threats seriously. The threat is real. This was proven in 2001 when Anthrax attacks killed five Americans and terrorized the nation. The FBI actively investigates violations of weapons of mass destruction laws and detecting and disrupting the acquisition and use of weapons of mass destruction on our homeland by terrorists or other adversaries.

The FBI's work falls into four areas: (1) National coordination that consolidated all of its WMD operations into a new WMD Directorate. The National Security Branch has oversight on this function. They work to identify and disrupt WMD operations and threats through the use of countermeasures and preparedness; investigative and operations; and intelligence analysis. (2) Local response that involves all 56-field offices nationwide. Each field office has a trained WMD coordinator who manages the assessment of and response to incidents involving the use or threatened use of WMD. Each coordinator works with regional, state and local emergency response, health and law enforcement to assist with notification and response to biological attacks. (3) Outreach and information sharing which include key areas of the private sector in order to increase awareness to potential threats and facilitate reporting of information with possible intelligence value. The FBI established a two-way dialogue to report suspicious activities that are WMD-specific called "INFRAGARD" portals. This portal provides unclassified information and intelligence products to the experts. (4) Preparedness in that the FBI frequently joins first responders, law enforcement, and health agencies in cities and communities across the United States in order to stage mock exercises. The FBI's role in these mock exercises is to test their ability to investigate and respond to the use of WMD.

Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) falls under the Director of Homeland Security. The primary mission of the Federal Emergency Management Agency is to reduce the loss of life and property and protect the Nation from all hazards, including natural disasters, acts of terrorism, and other man-made disasters, by leading and supporting the Nation in a risk-based, comprehensive emergency management system of preparedness, protection, response, recovery, and mitigation. Their role in a biological attack would be to set up the control center and coordinate all efforts in the event of an attack. They would coordinate the health sectors, law enforcement, and other agencies needed as first and second responders to an attack.

FEMA would be the primary player in setting up and running mock exercises in order to prepare for biological attacks on the United States.

FEMA role in the National Response Plan is also strategic. They are primary organization that leads all federal organizations in setting up the operations cells as well as other coordination with local, state and other agencies. FEMA is the command and control during all natural disasters to include WMD attacks on the United States.

The Center for Disease Control (CDC) plays a major role in a biological attack as they would direct and assist local treatment facilities to take care of the injured. They would also assist in FEMA in the coordination for damage control and clean up of the region affected by the biological attack.

The National Disaster Medical System (NDMS) has 100,000 hospital beds across the country in the event of a terrorist attack to include biological attacks. This would prove to be too few as a few kilograms of Anthrax could kill as many people as a Hiroshima-size nuclear weapon.

Local and State law enforcements role would be to assist in containing the region in the event of a biological attack. They are supposed to cordon off the area and help assist in getting people to treatment. All direction would be taken from the operations center ran by FEMA. Law enforcement personnel receive training and conduct periodic training on disaster assistance. The amount of training is based on the perceived threat and vulnerabilities related to their areas. Funding also plays an important role in the amount of training conducted by local and state law enforcement agencies. Persistent issues are the likeliness of a biological attack in most regions of the United States. Timing is another issue when it comes to training. All the coordinated must be started with FEMA and time made available from the other pertinent federal, local and state agencies in order for proper training to take place. To expect a small city to take the initiative and set up a mock exercise without other agencies assistance will not happen. Hospitals and other medical response agencies also lack the preparedness based on training. The CDC provides information on biological attacks to the medical personnel on how to handle, but the lack of training would create the problems. In 2005, the city of Detroit, Michigan was supposed to conduct WMD training event. All was coordinated with local, state and federal agencies. When it came time to execute the training event, the scenario was changed to a chemical drug lab explosion due to the lack of material. Ms. Cherie Thurner, R.N. participated in this particular exercise. She felt it was a complete failure as coordination and communication were lacking. Ms. Thurner explained that a bus carrying injured personnel actually drove through the chemically contaminated site enroute to the medical facility. This lack of training creates a problem when trying to organize and prepare officials in the event of a biological attack. The idea that a WMD exercise was changed because of a lack of coordination and

material is inexcusable in a city as large as Detroit, Michigan. Lessons learned were annotated, but training was never conducted to correct the deficiencies.

United States Northern Command (NORTHCOM) was created as a new command structure with the explicit mandate to defend the United States against foreign terrorists. In the Biodefense for the 21st Century, the United States military forces are included to meet the biological weapons challenge. NORTHCOM would assist in the detection, disruption and response to any biological attacks in the United States. Although a federal operation, NORTHCOM would assist in the operations center, the “Posse Comitatus Law” by providing the United States Military in assistance with other local and state law enforcement and medical personnel in the securing of the area and treatment of the injured.

NORTHCOM would serve in an advisory role and report to the Department of Defense (DOD) on all terrorist attacks within the United States. It’s important that the United States Military has a role in Homeland Defense since our military is a major deterrent for rogue nations. As for terrorism, the military can only respond, but for other nations, the United States military strength, training and might serve as excellent deterrence for biological attacks.

In conclusion, the threat of a biological attack is ever present and the United States has a plan to detect and deter an attack. But the extreme amount of coordination and communication between the federal agencies internally, then externally to local and state agencies pose the biggest risk. This is a risk that can be mitigated through continuous cross level training amongst all participants. Although the United States has a plan, the smaller agencies are ill prepared for such an attack due to factors such as funding, training, and the seriousness of an attack in their regions. Biological attacks are just one of many ways to create terror in the United States and we should not forget that in 2001, biological agents killed five citizens of the United States. It is likely to happen again based on the Global War on Terrorism and ease of producing and dispersing biological agents.

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