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New Jersey

State spreads out terrorism response duties

Officials say they have plan ready to ensure residents' security when threat is received

Thursday, March 20, 2003

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Standing alone before the cameras in Washington, D.C., earlier this week, Homeland Security Secretary Tom Ridge outlined the latest efforts that U.S. officials are taking to secure the nation's airports, ports and railways as war looms against Iraq. Conversely, at a news conference in Trenton this week, Gov. James E. McGreevey, acting Attorney General Peter Harvey, Office of Counter-Terrorism Director Sidney Caspersen and State Police Office of Emergency Management Maj. Dennis DeFava all fielded questions about New Jersey's level of readiness against possible terrorism.

When it comes to security, Ridge is the nation's top official. In New Jersey, however, responsibility for homeland protection rests with a group of state and law enforcement officials who must interact with local and federal authorities.

"There's definitely a coordinated response ... ultimately through the governor," said Micah Rasmussen, the governor's spokesman.

McGreevey issued an executive order after taking office in January 2002 creating the Office of Counter-Terrorism to administer, coordinate and lead New Jersey's counter-terrorism and preparedness efforts with the goals of identifying, deterring and detecting terrorist-related activities. Among the Office of Counter-Terrorism's personnel are 25 State Police investigators.

With New Jersey officials redoubling security initiatives, Rasmussen said Caspersen is the focal point of the counter-terrorism efforts.

"He's our Tom Ridge," she said.

Each government agency plays a particular role.

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McGreevey is the only person who can declare a state of emergency, allowing him to deploy the National Guard and seek federal assistance. Harvey, expected to be confirmed as attorney general this week, coordinates all law enforcement efforts at the local, county and state level. Caspersen is the liaison among local, state and federal officials on anti-terrorism initiatives. DeFava's Office of Emergency Management runs a command center overseeing deployment of personnel during a crisis.

Caspersen, in an interview Tuesday, said he and McGreevey have top-secret security clearances and are included on Ridge's conference calls regarding security updates. FBI and CIA officials also provide assessments to the states on threat levels.

"I'm coordinating. We're the single point of contact by executive order," Caspersen said. "We're ultimately responsible for coordinating all activities. We're building data and intelligence. We report to the attorney general and governor when necessary."

McGreevey's Cabinet leaders are then notified if the level of threat is increased.

"And we at the Office of Counter-Terrorism do the same: We go on a 24/7 schedule, investigators are handling leads and tips, which generally increase when the threat level goes to orange," Caspersen said. "We also notify the State Police's Office of Emergency Management and superintendent, who also go to a 24/7 schedule, according to their protocol."

In case of emergency, corporate officials, law enforcement authorities and state representatives would be notified through a computer program that contacts people's cell phones, then their pagers, then their e-mail, Caspersen said. Statewide conference calls would be held with chiefs of police and county prosecutors and coordinators.

"In New Jersey, there are no specific threats, but there is intelligence that indicates certain types of targets at risk," said Caspersen, citing U.S. Department of Homeland Security information, without providing details.

In his role as attorney general, Harvey has authority over the Office of Counter-Terrorism and State Police Office of Emergency Management.

"For all intents and purposes, the attorney general will be involved in formulating the decisions impacting public safety," said John Hagerty, a spokesman for the state Division of Criminal Justice. "When you look at the chain of responsibility, the chain of command ... all report to the attorney general. The attorney general, obviously through his senior staff, will keep the governor informed."

DeFava, the state OEM chief, said the State Police are working with the FBI's terrorism task forces in Philadelphia and New York.

Meanwhile, local police, fire and rescue officials -- likely the first on the scene in the event of an attack -- report directly to their city or county offices of emergency management.

If Jersey City police officers detected a chemical release and suspected a terrorist attack, for example, they would report to the city's Office of Emergency Management, which in turn would contact the state OEM.

OEM could then coordinate the necessary response among dozens of agencies statewide, such as requesting the governor to mobilize the National Guard and asking that hospitals put emergency response plans into effect.

And the OEM would be in direct contact with the U.S. Department of Homeland Security, which oversees the Coast Guard and Customs and has a direct line to the president.

Lee Clarke, a Rutgers University sociology professor and an expert on disaster response, said it is impossible to have a single state official responsible for organizing a response to an attack.

"You'll see more of a fragmented response at the state and local level simply because there are more units there to respond. And fragmented is not a bad thing in this case," said Clarke, who worries about too much federal input. "Disaster response has been traditionally a local affair, and that's entirely appropriate, because disasters happen to particular localities."

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