Secretary Ridge's Remarks on the Council for Excellence in Government Report

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Council for Excellence in Governement
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(Remarks as Prepared)

Good morning. Over the past nine months the Department of Homeland Security has been proud to participate in the Council for Excellence in Government initiative to engage the American people about the role we all share when it comes to the security of our communities and our country.

Certainly the tragic attacks of September 11th completely re-defined the homeland security mission. In an instant, we came face to face with an enemy bent on the destruction of our way of life, capable of carrying out catastrophic attacks to achieve sadistic goals, and unscrupulous in their regard for the innocent.

Those attacks required a swift and drastic change to our understanding of terrorism in the 21st century...and a new philosophy of how we were going to step up the security of this country.

We knew right away, Homeland Security could not begin and end at the doors of a federal department building in Washington, D.C. Washington can be expected to lead, but we cannot, nor should not, micro-manage the protection of our country.

Instead, it must be a priority in every city, every neighborhood, and every home across America. And in the nearly two years since 9/11, we have seen that national mission and mindset come to life.

Today, homeland security is about the integration of a nation, and nations -- state and local governments, communities, businesses, and citizens -- all coming together around a shared goal of protecting our country and safeguarding our people from those who would seek to do us harm.

Our goal is to achieve seamless protection -- a nation knit tightly together by shared vigilance, preparation, and communication. A layered web of security that enables goods and visitors to flow freely and securely, but disables terrorists from carrying out their malicious plots.

The success of this effort and ultimately the entire homeland security mission depends in part on the involvement and work of our citizens. Because if our communities are to rise to new levels of preparedness and security, each individual American must choose to make emergency planning a priority -- a priority in our homes, at our places of work, and in our schools.

Thanks to the work of the Council for Excellence in Government and the series of town halls the CEG leadership and staff so ably organized, Homeland Security officials -- including myself -- were able to hear first hand the concerns and questions on the minds of many Americans.

That dialogue has provided an important and useful resource that will help guide our continued efforts at Homeland Security to engage and empower citizens.

One of the key findings in the Council's report released today is the need to raise the baseline level of preparedness in America. As we have learned through these town halls, there is an information gap that exists now between citizens and government -- one that together we must close.

Making sure our citizens are informed is, without doubt, one of our most important goals. We have emergency preparedness experts in government who are constantly at work on information and advice that will make a

difference in the event of a crisis. What is encouraging about the CEG report is that it shows that there is, indeed, a great desire for this information. Citizens want to know how they can best protect their families.

At Homeland Security, we've worked to get this life-saving information to citizens in a variety of ways. Our efforts have centered around both the "Ready" Campaign and Citizen Corps.

As many of you know, "Ready" is a national public service advertising campaign Homeland Security launched to educate citizens about how to prepare for and respond to potential terrorist attacks.

Our strategic partner in the Ready campaign, the Ad Council, declared that "Ready" was one of the most successful campaign launches in the 62-year history of their organization. Millions of people have visited the web site and called to get the brochure. But most importantly, Americans are taking action. The Ready campaign asks people to do three things: make a plan, get a kit, and be informed.

There's been marked progress of people taking action in all of those areas. Perhaps most significantly there's been a twelve percent increase -- now up to forty percent -- in parents with children at home who have made emergency preparations for their families.

Citizen Corps has helped promote the work of the "Ready" campaign and been a tremendous tool to engage Americans at an individual level to invest in the security of their community. The Citizen Corps mission is to encourage everyone to participate in making America safer. And the Citizen Corps Councils, which have grown to more than 1,100, have helped us deliver the Ready message at the grassroots level -- the level where it's needed most.

Through the Ready campaign, through work with partners such as the American Red Cross and of course, Citizen Corps, we are pushing much-needed information out to the public so it can be used in a meaningful way.

However, at the end of the day, no information expert, no government entity, no organization will make your family's emergency kit, nor go to the hardware store and stock up on batteries and flashlights, nor design your family emergency plan.

Emergency preparedness starts with individual responsibility. I could have all the information in the world, but I have to make a choice to act on it and so does every single American.

And that of course it the really tough part of emergency preparedness -- from the government's perspective. Because as a government we have to depend on citizens to take the information we provide and put it to use. This is a vital message and one that frankly we need help in spreading.

Even though I can use the bully pulpit to hammer home the benefits to you of preparation and planning, each of you has a vast network of friends, colleagues, and family members that you can reach and impact far more effectively than anyone in government ever could.

Fortunately, there is a willingness on the part of Americans to take on this responsibility. As the CEG report makes clear, Americans want to help. They just need to know how.

From spreading the Ready message to friends and family, to volunteering with the Red Cross, to joining a local Citizen Corps chapter, there are countless ways for citizens to make a difference.

In many ways, the opportunity for citizen service is much like the challenge we face at Homeland Security. There are so many needs and areas to cover that it can be a difficult decision to determine where to invest our resources and time.

However, necessity propels us forward. And fortunately, at Homeland Security our great strength is the knowledge that we are not alone in this endeavor. We have a network of support from many sectors of our society that helps guide and direct our efforts.

It's the same for every individual. You are not alone in this endeavor -- millions of Americans are partners in the

work of citizen preparedness and service.

That service starts with preparing your family, then grows to a group of neighbors who work to make sure their neighborhood is prepared, then grows to the moms and dads who have children in school who work through their PTA to make sure their schools are prepared, then grows as they take that same message to their offices and develop evacuation and communication plans for their work.

As you can see each citizen has the power to be a genesis for service in their very own homes, and by taking that first step, send mighty ripples across our society.

It will take that type of initiative and commitment on the part of our citizens to reach the goal Homeland Security has set. Our aim is that nearly half of all Americans, in some form or combination, will be better prepared by the end of 2004 -- whether that's by preparing family Ready kits and emergency plans; volunteering to aid in disaster planning; or engaging in CPR and training exercises to help someone in a life-threatening situation.

To help push this agenda forward, we will add to the strength of our existing Ready campaign by launching two new citizen preparedness endeavors -- Ready for Business and Ready for Kids.

Of course, it's important to point out that, as we develop these guidelines of preparedness for our businesses and schools, the American people will not be waiting for the federal government.

There is valuable information already available. The Red Cross has emergency preparedness guidelines for schools. And there is an excellent set of voluntary guidelines for business preparedness established by the American National Standards Institute and the National Fire Protection Association.

Citizens should feel empowered to take pro-active steps to make their places of study and business safe and prepared for any type of disaster. Our own efforts as a government will then be able to enhance the efforts already begun at the grassroots level.

Of course, as the CEG report points out, information sharing and greater coordination are critical not just to citizen preparedness, but to the homeland security mission as a whole. This is another top priority for our Department this year.

Our Homeland Security philosophy of integration and shared resources requires the tools to enable communities to communicate and work together. During an emergency situation, effective communication and coordination is an absolute necessity for our nation's first responders.

One of the great tragedies of our response at the World Trade Center was that equipment didn't work across jurisdictions and disciplines. Within New York City, police department radios couldn't transmit to the fire department radios. And when engine companies rushed in from nearby neighborhoods, they were often unable to help because the couplings that fit "hoses to hydrants" were incompatible.

But from these disappointments emerged a resolve not to let an incompatible radio frequency or a too-small/too-large piece of safety equipment impede the ability of brave men and women to save the lives of citizens, as well as their own.

This Department is taking steps in the short term to fix the immediate communications problems that were dramatized at the Trade Center on 9/11. In the end, when we say "interoperability" we are basically talking about a "technology translator" -- the capability of first responders to communicate and understand each other regardless of technology, mode of communication, or frequency. Already, we have identified technical specifications for a baseline interoperable communications capability, so that first responders will have an interim way to talk to each other during a crisis.

We've also announced the first set of standards for personal protective equipment, in order to protect first responders against chemical, biological, radiological and nuclear hazards -- measures that will safeguard their well-being as they put their lives on the line to safeguard ours.

To help lead the nation to a long-term solution to improve overall interoperability, last week, I announced the creation of a new office for interoperability and compatibility. This new office will focus not just on interoperable communications, but also on the gear, training and equipment that will be used by multiple jurisdictions as first responders from different neighborhoods join together to respond to a major event.

And, in addition, we have introduced the National Incident Management System -- or NIMS -- the nation's first-ever standardized approach to incident management and response. So that, in the event of a crisis, everyone understands what their role will be -- and will have the tools they need to be effective.

This is just the beginning, but these are crucial first steps that will help bridge the communications and connectivity gap that exists across the first responder community.

A bridge that will help ably protect our communities, as we work towards a long-term solution of interoperable integration, a solution that will encompass the input of our partners in the first responder community and at the state and local leadership level. A solution that will permanently plug the communications and connectivity gap exposed on 9-11. A solution that will draw our communities ever closer and further harden our nation's defenses against terrorist enemies.

All in all, we have made significant strides toward the type of seamless protection we need if our nation is to remain strong and safe in the face of a rising tide of terrorist aggression.

However, we know that homeland security is not a static mission. It is an ever-evolving charge.

So we must be ready and willing to adapt and evolve to new information and new challenges that come along with this new threat our country now confronts. In our second year as a Department, we are grateful for partners such as the Council for Excellence in Government who continue to support our work as we evolve and grow.

Ultimately, we are best served as a nation if we can realize that we are building toward a goal of safety and security that truly has no limits. As long as the threat of terrorism endures, the work of Homeland Security never ends and neither does the responsibility of citizen service.

So, we take it one day at a time. But with each day we press forward, we climb higher, we push further, to make our nation and people more secure.

"Citizen" is a title our forefathers fought and died to claim. Now it falls to all of us to preserve it so that future generations will inherit not only the title of "citizen," but also the blessings of liberty that it bestows.

That is the call to service we all must answer at this critical time in our nation's history. I look forward to our discussion today and in the coming months of how we can best ensure that it is a call that does not go unanswered.

Thank you.

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