The national scene

Since the attacks of September 11, 2001, officials at all levels of government have been confronted with enormous challenges, ranging from addressing the need for increased security at public and private facilities to stimulating stagnant economies and reassuring a nervous citizenry. The continuing threat of attacks makes these challenges even more complex.

The broad response by government and the private sector to the September 11 attacks, their subsequent roles with anthrax incidents, and our overall reaction to the on-going threat provide some idea of the scope of potential players that will be critical in our national approach to improved preparedness. As a nation we must be capable of deterring and preventing attacks, and when the unthinkable occurs, we must be prepared to effectively respond and recover. Effective preparedness will not be achieved by the actions of a single agency or level of government. We must have a truly integrated approach that brings the needs, resources, and expertise of all potential stakeholders—both public and private—to the table.

Our collective response to these tragedies has reflected the best in American spirit. Contemplating the potential for additional attacks, officials across the nation began hurriedly enhancing security around key public and private facilities. Concurrently, they began to take a close look at emergency response plans, buoyed by the realization that if their communities became the next target of terror, they needed to be ready to respond.

The rapid lights-and-siren response was quickly replaced with the sobering reality of the scope and magnitude of the attacks. Our national economy was wounded, fear permeated the lives of Americans, and the very fabric of our society was shocked. Not since Pearl Harbor had our nation been the direct victim of an attack from a foreign enemy. September 11 wrote a new chapter in the history of the United States. In the case of public policy officials at all levels of government, the attacks immediately required us to reexamine our priorities and to adjust our focus.

Clearly there are areas where improvement is needed in terms of the planning, training, and equipment resources provided to emergency responders. The September 11 events are yielding tremendous lessons for current and future generations of emergency responders and government leaders. But the greatest opportunity for change in government in decades may, in fact, lie in the days ahead, and its success will be determined by how well we organize to address these new and emerging challenges.

Virginia's homeland security

Virginia’s efforts to prepare for a potential terrorist attack date to the 1990s. Following the first bombing of the World Trade Center in 1993 and the attack against the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City in 1995, local and state officials began to more fully contemplate the specter that Virginia could someday be the target of terrorists. Preparation efforts during those periods represented collective partnerships between state and local officials working with federal authorities and the private sector. That preparation was evident in the commonwealth’s quick response to the attack on the Pentagon, and while Virginia can be proud of the preparations it took, it is clear that work remains to be done.

Governor Mark R. Warner recently instituted the Secure Virginia Initiative, created to serve as a catalyst to enhance Virginia’s “preparedness for emergencies and disasters of all kinds, including terrorist attack.” The governor’s goal is to strengthen the partnership between citizens, communities, agencies of government, and the private sector relative to preparedness. The initiative is designed to foster a collaborative partnership between the state and its communities and citizens, among our state agencies, and with feder-
expected federal funding and/or state funding can assist with addressing gaps and shortfalls.

We will focus our initial attention on assessing the threat to Virginia. This assessment is critical for providing leaders accurate information on which to base decisions. As we look at the threat, it is clear that we need to be capable of addressing the full spectrum of potential disaster scenarios, including terrorist-implemented, conventional, so-called weapons of mass destruction and cyber attacks, as well as natural disasters and emergencies. Before September 11, federal program focus was being driven without a totally clear national-level assessment and understanding of the threat. We were making improvements in some areas and not in others. There was no strategic focus across all levels of government or across the private sector. We simply did not have a full and complete understanding of what, as a nation, needed to be done to prepare the country.

The Secure Virginia Panel will turn its efforts to assessing the commonwealth’s preparedness programs. Given the complex nature of coordinating efforts across the full range of agencies and branches in the federal government and with states and communities, we recognize that our success as a state in preparing to counter the threat will require a common vision of what it is we are trying to achieve.

Today, our strategy is to identify gaps and shortfalls that must be addressed. Are first responders adequately trained and equipped to handle any scenario, and if not, how can we accomplish that? Do critical utilities have the redundancy to recover from an attack, and do they have the ability and incentive to communicate with each other and with the government?

Because resources will be limited, especially during this time of revenue deficiencies, we will not be able to do everything we may want to do in the near term. We must, therefore, prioritize our approach to address gaps and shortfalls so that we can meet our most immediate needs first. How we spend our money is more important than how much we spend.

**September 11 as a blueprint**

Part of our assessment entails looking at the aftermath of September 11. The monumental emergency response that day was nothing less than heroic, and the effects of some decisions were felt in every home and corner of the United States and around the world. For instance, the decision by our President and his advisors to ground aircraft in America was crucial. But there were dramatic repercussions, and it became clear how much we depend on our private-sector air-transportation community to move people and goods critical to the activity of our economy. Also critical to the transportation infrastructure are our roads, bridges, commercial shipping ports, railroads, and mass transit. Some primarily fall under federal jurisdiction, while others are controlled by the state or by private entities, and protecting them all will require a great deal of cooperation.

Our financial-services sector suffered a double blow with the halt of trading on the New York Stock Exchange and our inability to move financial documents, such as checks, between key processing centers. Mail was delayed. A nation already suffering the effects of a recession was further harmed when critical sectors came to a standstill.

The subsequent anthrax attacks affected not only government facilities on Capitol Hill and post offices, but also the media, hospitals, and thousands of private-sector activities. Many hospitals do not have the resources or training to carry out sophisticated terrorism consequence management plans and will need help in doing so. Most critically, the anthrax attacks added another serious concern for our citizenry. The public must be reassured and instructed in how to react, and the state’s emergency public information system must have the resources and a plan to provide accurate, timely, consistent information.

Threats against our critical infrastructures—power systems, including nuclear power plants; chemical processing facilities; rail and water transportation sectors; and telecommunications and information technology interests—pointed out the vast policy challenges we face in conquering the threat posed by terrorists. For instance, as our knowledge of who knew what about the hijackers continues to evolve, questions arise about the line between confidentiality and information sharing between agencies. If these individuals were known by government agencies to be a threat, was the information made available to Division of Motor Vehicles clerks in Virginia, state troopers in Maryland, or the air-school operator in Florida? Did the airline ticket agents at Dulles, Newark, or Logan have any reason to suspect that the terrorists were not ordinary passengers but rather instruments in a complex scenario of destruction and death? In our vast information-technology dependent world, were we doing what was needed to ensure that public and private databases were interactive to alert us to the threat we faced?

Information technology infrastructures are also key to critical state agencies and private-sector parties for command and control capabilities, communication and recovery efforts, and access to critical databases and, therefore, pose an attractive target for attack. Yet indications are that many are neither redundant nor secure. System security and adequate backup and recovery ability are necessary to ensure continued state government operations and recovery efforts in the event of an attack.

**Acting as one Virginia**

The guiding principle of the Secure Virginia Initiative will be collaboration. The panel will convene meetings of individuals representing the key public and private stakeholder groups, including the experts found at our research universities, to solicit input. We will reach out to Virginia’s leaders, the men and women who are on the front line of any response, to identify existing best practices or problem areas. Most importantly, we will reach out to Virginia’s citizens. Government’s fundamental responsibility is to ensure the safety and security of its citizens. Today our citizens are looking to government for reassurance that it is addressing these responsibilities. Our preparedness initiatives must be constructed with the solid involvement of the people in our communities by creating a two-way information flow that will allow our citizens to provide us with information and feedback. Secure Virginia offers us the opportunity to strengthen our preparedness for any emergency or disaster, including terrorism, by making our citizens and communities essential elements of our work. A stronger Virginia will be a better Virginia.