

## **Government Is Slow to Offer Safety Plans**

### **Local, National Offices Have Yet to Disclose Advice People Could Use in a Terrorist Attack**

**Barton Gellman**  **Washington Post Staff Writer**  
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**NEW YORK** -- In a closed meeting recently in Manhattan, Police Commissioner Ray Kelly fielded a question about the city's evacuation plan in case of biological, chemical or radiological attack. "He took a long sip of his tea, and put it down, and said, 'What evacuation?' " recalled one participant, whose employer forbids him to be quoted by name. "He said, 'This is a city of 8 million people. It can't be done.' "

To someone choosing between shelter and flight when contaminants are in the air, that would be valuable information. National models show that a sudden exodus from nearly any big city would leave people gridlocked and exposed, while safe rooms they could make at home could offer life-saving protection. (See guide, Page A6.)

But President Bush and local elected leaders are not providing this information to the public. For political and bureaucratic reasons, governments at all levels are telling far less to the public than to insiders about how to prepare for and behave in the initial chaos of a mass-casualty event.

Homeland Security Director Tom Ridge often describes another major attack as "a matter of when, not if," and he said recently it could kill "vast numbers of Americans." But he has not yet urged the public to take available steps that could reduce the toll. When asked, the government is dispensing generic guidance with fewer particulars than it puts in pamphlets about hurricanes and winter storms.

The Bush administration, Congress and some municipal authorities are preparing themselves more effectively for an attack. Congress, for example, has evacuation routes and respiratory protection for every member and aide. Kelly, who could not be reached for this article

after a faxed letter and telephone calls, keeps emergency water, food and medical supplies for his office.

Mayor Anthony A. Williams (D) and the D.C. government are among the most aggressive in urging the public to make similar preparations. Since Sept. 11, they have printed a brochure in nine languages, as well as in braille, and have mailed a copy to every household in the District.

Even so, the D.C. Family Preparedness Guide relies on euphemisms that obscure its meaning, such as "technological hazards" for chemical and biological weapons. And according to federal scientists, some of its instructions are outdated and others are too vague to be effective.

John Sorensen, director of the Emergency Management Center at the federal government's Oak Ridge National Laboratory in Tennessee, said he "offered to develop brochures for chemical weapons, biological agents and so forth" that would describe in plain language what Americans could do to prepare. He said the Federal Emergency Management Agency and the American Red Cross, which jointly publish the most widely used disaster preparation materials, "told me, 'We're not in the business of terrifying the public.' " Officials at both organizations said they prefer to provide advice broad enough for any disaster, natural or man-made.

Thomas A. Glass, principal investigator in a National Science Foundation study of public behavior during emergencies, said the research found that planners consistently forecast panic that does not take place and misconceive the reasons for unsafe behavior. In 10 calamities over seven years, the public responded rationally, he said, but "will do all kinds of [unsafe] things because they haven't been prepared." The widespread assumption "that if you talk to the public about what can happen they will panic is borne out by nothing." After examining hundreds of government contingency plans, Glass said they commonly treat the public in the manner "of animal husbandry."

The Bush administration has struggled with public disclosure of risks and precautions. Political appointees said the White House is reluctant to do more in part because it sees its color-coded "homeland security advisory system," introduced in March, as a public relations failure. Until recently, elected officials also calculated that asking the public to make specific preparations at home would undercut the political message that government is doing everything that can be done.

"Most people want to feel their elected and public safety officials are dealing with this," said Mayor Michael Guido of Dearborn, Mich., in comments echoed by Bush administration officials who declined to be named.

Public opinion research is beginning to suggest that vagueness is a political liability. David Bell, who is chairman of the Advertising Council and a friend of Ridge, brought the public discontent to the attention of the former Pennsylvania governor. Ridge had earlier asked the council to promote Bush's new USA Freedom Corps.

According to written findings made available to The Washington Post, the Ad Council assembled focus groups during the week of July 8 in Fairfax County, Cincinnati and Los Angeles. Participants were "hungry for leadership and action: to be told what to do to be more prepared, to be assured that this preparedness can make a difference" and to "take responsibility upon themselves."

"I was waiting for somebody to tell me, 'Okay, we have this [potential] threat,' " complained a focus group member in Cincinnati. " 'If this happens, then you need to do A, B and C.' "

When mayors and city managers gathered in New York on July 26 for the National League of Cities' working group on homeland security, several of them expressed frustration. "A red box, blue box, yellow box is not going to tell us what we need to know," Brenda Barger, mayor of Watertown, S.D., told Ridge's representative

across the table. "You know what people are doing? They're blowing it off. We need to know what to do."

Joshua Filler, an aide to Ridge, replied that the mayor should determine that for herself. "The community should decide, 'This is what we're going to do at [risk advisory level] yellow,' " he said.

Susan Neely, Ridge's director of communications, acknowledged that "that doesn't seem to be a satisfactory answer to people."

In a telephone interview, Ridge said, "there has been enough concern expressed by the public" that Washington will have to address it. "People are seeking good information. . . . I certainly anticipate talking about it, because citizens want to know."

So recent is that decision that the National Strategy for Homeland Security, released July 16, mentioned nothing about self-protection for individuals and families.

As long as eight years ago, a federal study concluded that education about chemical attacks and how to survive them would save lives if the lethal agents were released among civilians. Claims that the public would panic at such advice, the study found, were "shown to be false" and appeared to be "excuses for not providing information."

"The stakes are huge," said Rep. Jane Harman (D-Calif). "I'm measuring it in lives. That's a pretty definitive measure."

The Bush administration is considering a television and radio campaign to be produced for free by the Ad Council, the group responsible for such iconic slogans as, "Friends don't let friends drive drunk."

Peggy Conlon, the council's president, said preparedness is "a very difficult communications challenge. One of the things we're very sensitive to, and we'll be testing the heck out of it, is there's a fine balance to strike between empowering people . . . and scaring them."

Early concepts for the public service campaign cast it as marketing for the government's existing disaster preparation advice, now scattered across many Web sites and in brochures that are distributed primarily on request.

FEMA and the Red Cross do not know how many people know about or follow their guidelines for self-protection at home. Lara Shane, a spokeswoman for FEMA, said, "We don't have a way to quantitatively measure how a message reaches the public, but we try to reach as many people as possible through our regional offices, Web sites and partnerships."

Local governments, which the federal agencies rely upon for distribution, seldom take the initiative.

New York, a prominent terrorist target, especially since the February 1993 World Trade Center bombing, has no printed guide for citizens. Emergency Management Commissioner John Odermatt said the city would begin information efforts at the moment of crisis, when "public awareness is extremely important." He said there were too many unknowns to advise residents to prepare in advance.

Withholding comment on evacuation is a matter of city policy. Untested internal estimates, created for hurricanes, say as many as 1 million New Yorkers might evacuate with advance warning of six to 72 hours. A sudden terrorist attack would allow far fewer to leave, but Odermatt said he had "no question" more would try without waiting for direction. The city does not educate residents against this impulse, he said, because "we can't pre-plan an evacuation. It depends on the incident or the type of incident."

C. Virginia Fields, the Manhattan borough president, commissioned her own pamphlet and printed 50,000 copies for a borough of 1.5 million. She has not mailed it. "That is a victim of the budget crisis," she said. An aide phoned later to say Fields would tape a radio message this week.

In the District, Williams said that residents "want information, they're adults, and they can deal with it." His government's family preparedness guide strikes a compromise.

It is among the few publications to allude to biochemical terrorism, if euphemistically. But its advice on the subject is questionable. The guide tells residents to "cover your nose and mouth with a wet cloth" in the event of a "technological hazards emergency." The research at Oak Ridge Laboratory in the 1990s found that a wet cloth impeded breathing without benefit. The District also advises people to use wet towels under doors at home, which the study found ineffective.

Peter LaPorte, the District's emergency management director, said he did not know about the Oak Ridge research but "we may need a rewrite to that section." He said the District should be praised for seeking a balance between "a level of seriousness" and spreading fears of a "doomsday scenario."

Nearly all government advice on terrorism sacrifices practical particulars for an unalarming tone. The usual guidance is to maintain a three-day supply of food and water along with a radio, flashlight, batteries and first-aid kit.

The FEMA-produced materials do not mention whether, why or when to evacuate, and they do not advise the public to keep plastic sheeting and duct tape available to prepare a "safe room" if directed by authorities. Federal research on chemical weapons found life-saving benefits in "simple taping and sealing," which cuts exposure to outdoor agents by a factor of 10.

There is also no published government advice for self-protection in the event of a nuclear blast or the detonation of a "dirty bomb," which might scatter radioactive debris. In the immediate vicinity of an atomic blast, there would be few, if any, survivors, but for people farther away or downwind of a dirty bomb, there are available steps. Jane Orient, president of Doctors for Disaster Preparedness, said a rule could be

offered in a dozen words: "You need to have mass between yourself and the source of radiation."

Shane said FEMA avoids discussion of specific threats because "whether the cause is an earthquake or a terrorist attack, if the building falls, the consequence is the same."

Still, FEMA prints and promotes many specialized preparedness publications -- for earthquake, fire, flood, heat wave, hurricane, landslide, severe thunderstorm, tornado, tsunami, volcano, wildfire and winter storm. It has none with special preparations for the circumstances of a terrorist attack.

Ridge said FEMA, once it is absorbed into Bush's proposed Department of Homeland Security, would be "a natural agency to give more specific [advice] to prepare for a more specific terrorist event. They're not there yet."

No government agency recommends that people buy respiratory filters in anticipation of an emergency. Yet a 324-page study at the Oak Ridge lab, evaluating more than 1,000 scenarios for evacuation, shelter and respiratory protection, found that inexpensive filter masks "may be used to significantly reduce exposure" to chemical warfare agents and some biological threats, including anthrax.

There are many threats against which the filters are useless, including biological weapons absorbed through the skin. But the study said masks rated "N95," which stop 95 percent of particles over 3 microns in diameter, were valuable against inhaled agents, although improper fit can make them less so. One kind, manufactured by 3M, resembles an oversized surgeon's mask and is available for less than \$1.50 each.

Sen. Bill Frist (R-Tenn.), a physician and public health expert, has issued detailed instructions for building a safe room. His book, "When Every Moment Counts," recommends that readers buy N95 masks for each family member. Frist said it would take "eight months to a year" for the executive branch to make up its mind

on the masks, and that a similar recommendation from Bush or Ridge might be more alarming to the public.

There is a striking disparity between the public brochures and the information given to about 200,000 untrained civilians who volunteer for a FEMA Community Emergency Response Team.

In simple, bulleted teaching points, instructors conduct the volunteers on a two-hour tour of the federal government's ironically acronymed catalogue of terrorist horrors -- B-NICE, for biological, nuclear, incendiary, chemical and explosive.

It takes 35 minutes, according to the instructor's guide, to teach the volunteers 14 ways to recognize an unconventional attack and simple rules for "self-care and protective action." For example, they learn the "three factors that you can apply for your safety: Time, Distance and Shielding." Because "time is critical" if exposed to chemical agents, instructors tell them not to wait for professional help but to undress and decontaminate with water and soap -- a subject rarely broached with the general public.

On Capitol Hill, even as the government avoids recommending filtered breathing masks for private citizens, Harman of California said, "Our office was counseled to use them when opening the mail."

Recently, Congress got better masks. In bags delivered to each office, the sergeant-at-arms provided enough hooded masks to protect every member of the Senate and the House and their staffs.

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