

Colorado Homeland Security System Held Up As Model

By Ed Sealover, Rocky Mountain News
July 28, 2008

Colorado's homeland security system, criticized as disorganized and ineffective as recently as February, is now a model for other states to copy, federal officials said today.

Department of Homeland Security and Federal Emergency Management Agency leaders spoke at a morning summit hosted by Gov. Bill Ritter and Democratic Congressman Ed Perlmutter and Mark Udall. Udall of Eldorado Springs had called for the meeting to see what progress can be made on the spending of federal grants locally.

Federal and state audits in 2005 criticized the Colorado program for its spending priorities and lack of organizational structure, and a 2008 audit said the state had ineffective controls for managing grants. After that last report, Ritter reorganized the office of homeland security and appointed Gen. Mason Whitney to run it.

Over the past five months, Whitney met with public-safety officials across the state to redefine Colorado's homeland-security strategy. He also worked to get the grant program under control.

Beth Marks, a program analyst for the homeland-security grants program, said today that there has been a "huge, positive change" in the way grants are administered in Colorado.

Garry Briese, the regional administrator for DHS and FEMA, said he was "very impressed" by Ritter's response, which has led to a stronger cooperation between federal and state agencies.

"If there's a model for getting an audit and improving on that audit, I think Colorado's it," Briese said.

A string of sheriffs, fire chiefs and emergency medical services personnel said, however, that there are still things to improve.

Tops among them is a federal rule that caps local spending on administering homeland-security programs at 3 percent of the total grant. Local communities that are required now to oversee spending won't sacrifice response times or other safety goals to put their own funds toward program administration, Arapahoe County Sheriff Grayson Robinson said.

Also, while nine regional planning organizations are coordinating homeland security within their areas throughout the state, there is little effort for the state to coordinate those regional groups, said Gary Severson, executive director of the 10-county Northwest Colorado Council of Governments. So, if a terrorist group attacked Denver and sent residents fleeing to less-populated areas, those areas would not be ready for the influx of evacuees, he said.

Udall commented that the message he took away from the meeting was that grants and planning should be under local control.

Perlmutter, a House Committee on Homeland Security member, said he will take concerns about the administrative funding limits backs to Washington.

The Wheat Ridge congressman noted that homeland security coordination will be tested during August's Democratic National Convention. But he is very pleased with the progress he has seen so far from the state, he said.

"The strides have been taken by our state," Perlmutter said. "I'm very pleased to go back to Congress to report that they are significant steps."

Source: <http://www.rockymountainnews.com/news/2008/jul/28/colorado-homeland-security-system-held-model/>