

UASI Grants Must Prioritize Risk

This week the Department of Homeland Security will announce awards for the Fiscal Year 2008 Urban Area Security Initiative. This program was created in 2003 to help secure high-threat, high-population density urban areas. Since that time, the Administration has repeatedly shortchanged first responders in high-risk areas.

New York City will receive \$144.2 million in FY08. While this \$10 million increase over FY07 is a step in the right direction, it remains substantially less than the \$205 million it received in FY05, nearly every city received less in FY08 than FY07, and significant problems remain in calculating awards. DHS's FY08 first responder grant allocation:

- Violates the law by awarding funds to areas that are not high-risk;
- Caps the amount of funds the seven most at-risk areas could receive, forcing New York, Washington, D.C., and a handful of other high-risk areas to compete against one another while protecting 45% of funds for 53 areas that may face no real threat of attack;
- Diminishes actual terrorist threats when considering risk of attack to a community; and
- Ignores unique circumstances facing high-risk communities.

DHS has made several inaccurate claims to justify its failure to adequately fund UASI grants to most cities.

DHS claim: Spending decisions reflect an overall analysis of threat data.

Fact: The risk formula DHS uses minimizes actual threats. In the formula, threat is only worth 20% even though the program is designed for high-threat urban areas.

DHS claim: Funding levels are a result of broader, national calculations.

Fact: Before DHS conducted a single risk assessment, it placed regions in tiers and capped the amount of funds for each tier. Even though the program was created for high-risk areas, DHS limited highest-risk areas to no more than 50% of total funds.

DHS claim: Legislation passed by Congress forced DHS to add cities.

Fact: The 9/11 Act (PL110-53) in no way requires DHS to fund a certain number of cities. It limits UASI to no more than the 100 largest metropolitan areas but it does not require it to fund a specific number. The decision to greatly expand the list is the Department's, not Congress's.

DHS claim: Cuts can be a result of the overall spending figure dictated by Congress.

Fact: The Democratic Congress increased funding for the program by \$50 million in FY08. DHS had the resources to increase funding for every area, but instead diluted funds for high-risk areas by adding cities to the list that aren't high-risk.

"After the Department's latest failure to adequately allocate grants on the basis of risk, I will introduce legislation to overhaul this process, ensuring that resources are directed to the areas that need them the most," said Lowey. "My legislation would limit UASI to high-risk areas, make threat an equal variable in risk determinations, and prohibit artificial caps in grant guidance."