

Robert Eckels
Harris County Judge



Homeland Defense

When I was elected county judge nine years ago, I never thought we would have to plan at the county level for a possible bio-terrorism attack against our part of the United States. Yet today such a contingency is clearly one of the most important responsibilities local leaders have.

When a major disaster strikes, the American people instinctively look to Washington for leadership. We look to the White House and the Congress for inspiration in dealing with adversity, and we continue looking to Washington for a helping hand in the recovery.

However, in New York City on September 11, 2001, and in the aftermath, we saw that first responders were city and county leaders at the local level, working with local public safety officials, local relief organizations and area citizens. Local leaders must be ready to react immediately and to deploy resources where they are needed while lives can still be saved.

To prepare for this mission, many are still looking first to Washington and the newly commissioned Department of Homeland Security. But there are many things local leaders can and must do to build a terrorism response network that meets the unique needs of our community. Numerous initiatives local leaders can implement today add little cost to the taxpayer.

For example, any local government can secure advance agreements to cooperate with other municipal jurisdictions in their area in the event of a disaster. Relief efforts that work all have one thing in common: Teamwork.

Cost Effective Measures Local Governments Can Launch Today

By
County Judge Robert Eckels
Harris County, Texas

Working together works, and together we can do more than any of us could do on our own. (See related article "Preparing for the Worst.")

We also cannot afford turf wars at the local level if the time comes to deliver disaster relief services to the 6 million people in our region. By committing ourselves to cooperation before disaster strikes, we will be better prepared if a nightmare scenario should come about.

The second cost-effective measure to aid terror response efforts is coordina-

tion. Every "basic plan" in every community should be based on a coordinated response that (1) integrates the roles and functions of essential internal agencies, (2) streamlines the disaster grant application process, and (3) delineates clear areas of responsibility in the event of a disaster.

A third element of cost-effective terrorism response is communication. In times of crisis, various police and fire departments should be able to talk to one another and share timely information. I have found that ensuring reliable communications across the broad spectrum of public safety departments takes many meetings and signed agreements to produce smooth communication across jurisdictions.

As communities across the country work to build their terrorism response networks, many of the resources and capabilities they need already exist. It is simply a matter of adopting the "Three Cs": external cooperation, internal coordination, and seamless communication.

Doing so requires a new way of thinking, and working together, and sharing information and critical assets. These efforts, in turn, will also make local governments better prepared for the more likely accidents, natural disasters and emergencies we deal with everyday – and not a nightmare scenario we hope never comes true.



Preparing for the Worst

Measures Harris County has taken to protect our community

- Harris County signed mutual aid agreements with the 29 cities within its borders and is currently approving Memorandums of Understanding with 13 surrounding counties. These agreements allow jurisdictions to cooperate with each other in the event of a disaster, whether man-made or natural.

- Harris County continues adding to the over 90 agencies already partners on its regional radio system, allowing law enforcement and first responders to communicate with each other during an emergency.

- In March 2002, Judge Eckels hosted an interactive, nationwide satellite broadcast on combating bio-terrorism. Local government agencies, the medical community, and members of the public attended. The broadcast described regional approaches to preventing and preparing for bio-terrorism and explored how counties, cities, states, and the federal government can work together to prevent and respond to a bioterrorist attack.

- In May 2002, Harris County was involved in a weapons of mass destruction drill with the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) and other federal agencies, the Texas Department of Public Safety, and local first responders.

- In September 2002, Harris County Commissioners Court addressed the region's trauma care problem by adopting the Gulf Coast Trauma Planning Task Force's vision—a coordinated, fully maintained metropolitan trauma response system that provides access to a trauma facility for every person within an hour of a trauma incident. A report of recommendations was also adopted by

the court and can be viewed at www.judgeeckels.org.

- In October 2002, Judge Eckels was appointed by Homeland Security Secretary Tom Ridge to serve on the State and Local Officials Senior Advisory Committee to President Bush's Homeland Security Advisory Council. In this capacity, Judge Eckels helped devel-

op the Statewide Template Initiative that was released in March 2003. The initiative provides a foundation for preparing comprehensive and compatible state, local and tribal Homeland Security plans.

- In November 2002, Harris County was the only county in the State of Texas to receive a Medical Reserve Corps grant from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. The grant will allow Harris County to establish a Medical

These efforts are working. The National Association of Counties (NACo) has awarded Judge Eckels the 2003 Caucus Courthouse Award for his leadership in homeland security.



Reserve Corps of volunteer health professionals to assist emergency response teams, provide care to victims with less serious injuries, and remove other burdens that inhibit the effectiveness of doctors and nurses during a large-scale crisis.

- In January 2003, Judge Eckels gathered more than 50 individuals representing the key departments and agencies from Harris County, the City of Houston, and the medical community to conduct a "dark winter" smallpox attack exercise. This exercise helped everyone identify problem areas and develop proactive solutions without spending significant funds.

- In March 2003, Judge Eckels led a meeting with Harris County and City of Houston leaders and officials with the Texas Medical Center to discuss the region's level of preparedness in responding to a mass casualty event.





Harris County Citizen Corps

Since Tropical Storm Allison and the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, the people of Harris County have acted with courage, compassion and unity.

To capture this spirit of service throughout the country, U.S. President George W. Bush has called on all Americans to dedicate at least two years of their lives – the equivalent of 4,000 hours – in service to others. He launched the USA Freedom Corps initiative to inspire and enable all Americans to find ways to serve community and country.

Citizen Corps is the component of USA Freedom Corps that creates opportunities for individuals to volunteer to help their neighborhoods prepare for and respond to emergencies by bringing together local leaders, citizen volunteers, and

the network of first responder organizations such as fire and police departments.

The goal is to have all citizens participate in making their communities safer, stronger, and better prepared for threats of terrorism and disasters of all kinds, while relieving burdens on our first responders on a day-to-day basis.

Harris County has taken the President's challenge. The Harris County Citizen Corps was formed in August 2002, and, after initial meetings, has agreed to:

- Provide a forum to work on improving response to emergencies before they occur.
- Coordinate efforts among agencies and volunteer groups, particularly during short-term volunteer response surges immediately following emergencies.

- Establish a plan to match volunteer skills, assets, and resources with community needs.
- Improve ways to communicate with volunteers during emergencies.
- Establish a plan to recruit, register, credential, and reward volunteers.
- Identify locations across the county for shelters such as schools and churches.
- Establish means of transportation for moving volunteers to sites where help is needed.
- Establish instruction for volunteers that includes first response training.
- Develop a program to train for specific disasters.

The Harris County Citizen Corps is committed to not duplicating efforts or creating another layer of bureaucracy.

- Citizen Corps will encourage people to sign up through the website, telephone or mail.
- Actual assignments for Citizen Corps volunteers will come from existing volunteer organizations.
- Citizen Corps will track a volunteer's hours or accept hours recorded by existing volunteer groups.
- Citizen Corps, although focusing efforts on disaster preparedness, will provide certificates of appreciation to any volunteer in the community that has 4,000+ hours of community service.

The Citizen Corps Council will also coordinate homeland security grant applications, which will originate with numerous federal and state agencies.



Judge Eckels and the Harris County Citizen Corps Council launch one of the first Citizen Corps programs in the country on August 26, 2002.

For more information or to volunteer today, visit www.harriscountycitizencorps.com or call 281-JOIN NOW.

7. How prepared do you think the following are?

	Very	Somewhat	Not at all
Federal government agencies	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
State of Texas agencies	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Harris County agencies	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
City of Houston agencies	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Hospitals	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
First responders	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Businesses	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Fellow citizens	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

You can also fill out this form and submit it online by visiting www.judgeeckels.org.

Fold along dotted line.

Place
Stamp
Here

Robert Eckels
Harris County Judge
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Houston, TX 77002

Harris County Terrorism Preparedness Survey

Please take the time to fill out this important survey so we can better serve you. You also can fill out this form and submit it online by visiting www.judgeeckels.org.

1. Since the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, do you feel less safe?

- Yes
 No

2. Do you think there is a real possibility of a terrorist act in Houston/Harris County?

- Yes
 No

3. The following type of terrorist act is most likely:

Attacks on chemical plants

- Yes
 No

Attacks on Electrical Power System

- Yes
 No

Suicide bombings

- Yes
 No

Attacks on transportation

- Yes
 No

Attacks on computers

- Yes
 No

Attacks on water or food supplies

- Yes
 No

Anthrax

- Yes
 No

Smallpox

- Yes
 No

4. I have taken the following steps to prepare for a terrorist attack:

Family emergency & communication plan

- Yes
 No

An emergency kit, including a three-day supply of food and water

- Yes
 No

Remaining informed of the different types of disasters and what might happen

- Yes
 No

None of the above

- Yes
 No

5. I have accessed the following Web sites:

www.ready.gov

- Yes
 No

Harris County Office of Emergency Management at

www.hcoem.org

- Yes
 No

U.S. Department of Homeland Security at www.dhs.gov

- Yes
 No

Harris County Citizen Corps at

www.harriscountycitizencorps.com

- Yes
 No

6. The source of information regarding terrorism MOST reliable:

Harris County/Houston officials

- Yes
 No

State of Texas officials

- Yes
 No

Federal government officials

- Yes
 No

Health department officials

- Yes
 No

Houston Chronicle

- Yes
 No

Talk radio

- Yes
 No

Radio

- Yes
 No

Television news

- Yes
 No

**For information to prepare
your family for a disaster,
visit the Harris County Office
of Emergency Management at
www.hcoem.org.**

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