

# Let's give our local authorities the resources to fight terrorism

By Rep. John B. Larson

**W**hen two aircraft struck the World Trade Center Towers on Sept. 11, the first emergency responses did not come from the Federal Emergency Management Agency or the FBI; it came from the men and women of the New York Fire Department, police force, emergency medical response units and hospitals. When another aircraft struck the Pentagon, the first response did not come from the U. S. military; it was nearly a dozen fire and police departments from surrounding communities in suburban Virginia that answered the call. The same was true in the fields of Pennsylvania.

As the nation's military fights the war against terrorism overseas, here at home we must provide local authorities in our cities and towns with the training, equipment and communication capabilities they need to battle and contain any future acts of terrorism on American soil.

Municipal governments, local emergency responders, health departments and hospitals are an integral part of the defense of our nation and are the first line of response to catastrophes in the United States as we saw on Sept. 11.

Local police are also heavily involved in the gathering and sharing of information that relates to terrorist activities or attacks. This means that in addition to responding should there be an attack, local public safety and health authorities also have a significant role in preventing acts of terrorism — including biological attacks — before they happen.

This is a heavy burden to carry and many municipalities need federal help to meet these local needs. Unfortunately, as it now stands, of the nearly \$9 billion spent on counterterrorism each year by the federal government, less than \$350 million ever makes it to municipalities; the rest remains within federal agencies.

While numerous local and regional authorities respond immediately to disasters, they have difficulty communicating among themselves, coordinating a response, and lack the funding, training and equipment to effectively deal with the kind of large-scale fallout we witnessed on Sept. 11, or possible biological, chemical or germ attacks. It is time for Congress to give them the resources they need to serve and protect our communities and create a bottom-up commonality of communication and interoperability among public safety departments.

In Congress we are introducing bipartisan legislation titled the Municipal Preparation and Strategic Response Act of 2001 to provide \$1.5 billion in funding for municipal agencies for the strategic planning needed to ensure they are fully prepared, equipped and trained for emergency and security issues that arise from terrorist attacks.

It would also provide for a coordinated regional response utilizing federal, state and local agencies in response to a terrorist attack. The bill requires no matching funds from local governments because the money is needed immediately and municipal budgets have long since been completed.

Under the legislation, FEMA would establish a local emergency response and preparedness grant that would award \$1 billion in grants to local government and emergency response units to develop strategic response plans; coordinate the activities and procedures of local, regional and state authorities; assess potential targets and threats; and determine what additional training and equipment is necessary to meet these needs.

The bill would also designate a representative for each state to advise local authorities and act as a liaison between the local and federal governments. Funding would also be available to inform and educate the public on how to communicate with authorities.

Additionally, the legislation would create new grant categories for counterterrorism under the Firefighter Assistance Program and the Community Oriented Policing Services program of \$250 million for each. These grants would be awarded through the existing program to local fire and police departments specifically for counterterrorism training and equipment.

President Bush has taken the first critical step in defending our nation against terrorism with the creation of the Office of Homeland Defense. Tom Ridge will have his hands full getting his arms around the coordination of federal agencies. The help and cooperation of local communities and states is essential in the planning of homeland defense.

Equally important is that the coordinated effort not be foisted upon states and municipalities from the top down by federal agencies. Congress can ensure our citizens and our front-line responders receive both the resources they need and the bottom-up input necessary to successfully defend the nation.

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