

Regional Response to All-Hazards Events: A Commonwealth Perspective

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Events of the past five years have illustrated the need to develop partnerships beyond one's contiguous borders. While state and federal resources will ultimately respond, the reality is that there will be a substantial gap between when those resources are requested and when they become operationally engaged. The challenge for all communities is how to fill that void until the "cavalry arrives."

The objective of this article is to provide an overview of the South Central Task Force (SCTF) and its role in developing and implementing a regional-based organization within a commonwealth form of state government to meet the "all-hazards" needs posed by today's emergency preparedness challenges.

Background

SCTF is one of nine regional counter-terrorism task forces originally formed in 1997 by the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania to coordinate local and regional efforts in response to acts of terrorism. In 2002, further authorities were granted under Pennsylvania's Counterterrorism Planning, Preparedness and Response Act 227-2002.

SCTF encompasses an eight-county region, covering an area of approximately 5,200 square miles and a population of over 1.7 million. The region includes the state capital of Pennsylvania, three metropolitan areas with populations exceeding 250,000, and the center of the Commonwealth's agriculture industry. Perry County, the smallest and most rural county, was the site where the 1993 World Trade Center bombers tested their explosive devices before the actual attack. Although it is not a DHS Urban Area Security Initiative (UASI) region, regional

threats, risks and response requirements are also influenced by its proximity to the Philadelphia and Baltimore metropolitan areas.

Pennsylvania is a commonwealth form of government, which results in a myriad of local, town, city, and township governmental jurisdictions. Within the south central region, there are 312 municipalities. Over 90% of fire/rescue organizations are volunteer-based, including the hazardous materials and Urban Search and Rescue (US&R)/technical rescue units. In contrast, the emergency medical services community is in the midst of shifting from a volunteer-based system to a career-based system. Finally, over 75% of the police departments have fewer than five officers. The following summarizes the SCTF regional response community:

- Fire/Rescue Departments = 326
- Police Departments = 143
- Emergency Medical Services (BLS) Agencies = 104
- Emergency Medical Services (ALS) Agencies = 31
- Hospitals = 16
- Special Operations Units [i.e., Tactical Teams (6), HazMat Response Units (6), US&R/Technical Rescue Companies (6)] = 18

The Regional Task Force Concept

Within Pennsylvania, the nine regional task forces serve as the regional point-of-contact for the distribution of all Department of Homeland Security Grant Program (HSGP) and Law Enforcement Terrorism Prevention Program (LETPP) grant funds. The Pennsylvania State Emergency Management Agency (PEMA) functions as the State Administrative Authority (SAA), and allocates the grant funds to the nine regional task forces. Each respective task force is then responsible for the development of a regional homeland security strategy and response plan that is consistent with both federal and state guidance.

The mission of SCTF is: 1) to foster and advance the capabilities of public safety providers, elected officials and other stakeholders throughout the region to protect lives and social/economic infrastructure from terrorist threats or incidents; and 2) to take a leadership role in the

development of a comprehensive regional counter-terrorism program that addresses planning, prevention, response, and recovery issues.

While the legislative basis for SCTF is primarily based upon terrorism-related risks, the Task Force has followed an “all-hazards” planning strategy since its inception. SCTF strategic priorities and objectives are consistent with *HSPD-8 – National Preparedness Goal* (March, 2005) and the *2003 Pennsylvania Homeland Security Strategy*. SCTF has conducted formal homeland security threat assessment processes in both 1999 and 2003, with the next threat assessment tentatively scheduled for 2007.

From a strategic perspective, SCTF exists to coordinate and facilitate the development of regional solutions to regional problems and response scenarios that may exceed the capability of local government agencies. It does not have any command and control authority, and there is no mandate for any agency or organization to participate in the regional process. As a result, SCTF must continuously “market and sell” the benefits of participating in the regional concept.

The Players

SCTF membership can be broken into three categories: the executive committee; liaison members; and SCTF participating agencies, organizations and individuals. A contract program manager is responsible for the day-to-day management and administration of Task Force activities, and another contractor serves as the exercise coordinator.

Executive Committee. SCTF is governed by an Executive Committee consisting of the Emergency Management Coordinator (EMC) from each county within the Task Force. The Chairperson and Vice-Chairperson must be state-certified EMC’s and are elected by the Executive Committee. All decisions are based upon a majority vote process.

Liaison Members. These representatives are from state or federal agencies that support or are involved in Task Force activities. Primary government agencies with a liaison to the Task Force include:

- PA Emergency Management Agency (PEMA)
- PA Department of Agriculture (DOA)
- PA Department of Corrections (DOC)

- PA Department of Environmental Protection (DEP)
- PA Department of Health (DOH)
- PA State Police (PSP)
- PA Wing, Civil Air Patrol
- PA National Guard, 3rd Civil Support Team (CST)
- Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), Harrisburg Office
- Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives (BATF), Harrisburg Office
- U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS), Philadelphia Office, Office of Infrastructure Protection
- U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA)

Participating Agencies. This is where the actual “work” is accomplished and includes public, private and volunteer agencies, organizations and individuals who fall into one of the following categories:

1. SCTF Subcommittee or Working Group member, including:
 - Business, Industry and Infrastructure Subcommittee
 - Communications Subcommittee
 - Criminal Justice Subcommittee, including the Tactical Team Working Group
 - Emergency Medical Services (EMS) Subcommittee
 - Equipment Subcommittee and Technology Working Group
 - Fire, Rescue and Hazardous Materials Subcommittee, including the HazMat Chiefs Working Group
 - Hospital Subcommittee
 - Training Subcommittee and Exercise Working Group
2. Agency or organization provided with SCTF-acquired resources which agrees to be available for regional mutual aid responses.
3. Individuals serving on SCTF discipline-specific units, Strike Teams or Task forces.

Concept of Operations

SCTF activities are based upon the following strategic planning assumptions:

1. Any regional response must build upon the elements of mutual aid used on a daily basis.
2. Although the primary focus of SCTF is directed towards terrorism planning and response, where possible all equipment acquired through DHS grant funds shall have a “dual use” or “all hazards” capability.
3. Local response agencies will likely be “on their own” for the initial 24 hours before substantial state resources and up to 96 hours before substantial federal resources will arrive.
4. SCTF planning, procurement and response policies and decisions will be based upon “regional” needs and perspectives vs. “local” perspectives.
5. Emphasis shall be placed upon implementing policy changes that can be institutionalized or will have long-term benefits in the event that current funding streams are terminated.

The SCTF regional concept of operations is based upon providing regional-based mutual aid for large-scale events that exceed the capabilities of local resources prior to the arrival of state and federal response assets. This concept of operations is primarily based upon the deployment of specialized regional response teams.

Under Pennsylvania Act 227, the Counter-Terrorism Regional Task Forces are required to establish “... specialized regional counter-terrorism response teams” that can be deployed in the event of a major event. Deployment of these teams builds upon the basic concepts of mutual aid, and provides a logical framework by which regional-based resources can provide assistance to local jurisdictions when an event exceeds their capabilities.

SCTF specialized response teams include the following:

- Incident Support Team – Type 4 Incident Management Team (IMT)
- Law Enforcement Strike Teams (LEST)

- Decontamination Strike Teams
- Hospital Decon Strike Teams
- Emergency Medical Services (EMS) Task Forces
- Special Operations Units, including five Hazardous Materials Response Teams certified to Pennsylvania Act 165 requirements, six Tactical Teams, technical rescue companies, and Pennsylvania US&R Company 1, which is an in-state component of the Pennsylvania Task Force 1 federal urban search and rescue team.

Accomplishments

The drive to establish a regional planning and response organization has been a significant challenge. Some of our accomplishments include:

1. Recognition of the Business, Industry and Infrastructure (BI&I) Subcommittee by its peers as the first Pennsylvania Regional Task Force that has successfully addressed coordination with the private sector on a regional basis. Since its inception in 2003, the Subcommittee has doubled in size and includes representation from eight critical infrastructure/key resource (CI/KR) sectors. During the 2005–2006 legislative session, the BI&I Subcommittee worked with Pennsylvania House legislators to introduce the Critical Infrastructure Tax Credit Bill, to provide tax credit incentives for private sector investment for security enhancements by critical infrastructure industries.
2. Implemented the Decon Strike Team concept, under which 37 fire department engine companies have been trained and are capable of initiating mass decontamination operations. These units can be deployed individually as a Decon Company to an incident or a hospital to provide decon support, or as a Decon Strike Team (five Decon Companies operating under the direction of a Strike Team Leader who is trained to the Hazardous Materials Technician level).
3. Implemented the concept of the SCTF Incident Management Team (IMT), which is typed as a Type 4 IMT under the NIMS resource typing standard. During the past year, the IMT has been deployed to provide support for the Northeastern Pennsylvania June floods, to a

major hazardous materials train derailment in Hershey, Pennsylvania, to the Nickel Mines Amish school shooting in October, and in January worked with the Pennsylvania Type 3 IMT to provide support for the Pennsylvania Farm Show Exposition.

4. Conducted a major field exercise (Wide Vigilance) that tested and validated the regional concept of operations. The exercise included response operations at three major field locations approximately 20 miles apart from each other (Letterkenny Army Depot, New Cumberland Army Depot, Fort Indiantown Gap), medical activities at all 16 regional hospitals, the activation of eight county Emergency Operations Centers (EOC), the establishment of a Regional multi-agency coordination center (MACC), and the processing of approximately 500 victims.
5. The 16 hospitals in the South Central Region have implemented an aggressive program to enhance their individual and collective capabilities. Key accomplishments include:
 - Enacted formal Memorandums of Understanding (MOU) among all 16 hospitals.
 - Developed a Regional Hospital Response Plan.
 - Implemented a uniform hazmat training curriculum that is used by all 16 hospitals.
 - Used both DHS and U.S. Health and Human Services - Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA) grant funding streams, increasing the surge capacity of regional hospitals.
 - Established a pharmaceutical cache for emergency response personnel.
 - Conducted over 20 tabletop exercises so that each hospital could exercise its plans, policies and procedures to respond to a terrorist incident causing a mass casualty event. These exercises were conducted in preparation for the October field exercise previously noted.
6. In 2006, approximately 3,800 students attended training courses coordinated and funded by SCTF, and delivered by SCTF-related agencies.

7. Delivered a series of seven Local Elected Officials Workshops to familiarize local and county elected officials with the regional concept, the role of SCTF, the process by which DHS grants management and procurement decisions are made, and to respond to their questions.
8. Delivered the Third Annual Homeland Security Conference that is designed to bring all of the various response disciplines together and facilitate their networking in an educational setting. The Conference brings together over 300 attendees annually.

The Task Force has received several awards for its efforts to establish a regional-based capability, including the International Association of Emergency Management (IAEM) 2006 Interagency Disaster Preparedness Award, the U.S. EPA Region 3 Partnership Award, and the Mid-Atlantic Regional All-Hazards Forum 2006 Regional Readiness Achievement Award.

The Future

SCTF has made substantial progress in developing a regional “all-hazards” planning, response and recovery capability. However, many challenges remain including:

1. **Managing the day-to-day business of emergency management and response while trying to facilitate the development of a regional concept requires good people, hard work and good balance.** In reality, there is no separate SCTF. The Task Force actually consists of numerous local and county-based agencies and organizations who have agreed to work together for the benefit of the collective eight county region. In simple terms, they simultaneously wear a “local hat” and a “regional hat.” In addition, most of the actual work performed at the “task level” is accomplished by individuals who already have a “full-plate.”
2. **The Regional Task Force concept is a “work in progress” and continues to lack authority in different areas.** While significant improvements have been made, the last five years have demonstrated the need for additional state legislative action to address Task Force gaps in mutual aid legal protections, workman compensation, and insurance protection. In addition, there currently exists no state

mechanism for funding emergency responses to large-scale regional incidents and events that exceed local capabilities.

3. **SCTF is currently a “people dependent” organization and if the regional concept is to grow and sustain itself, it must become a “system dependent” organization.** SCTF is fortunate to have a cadre of highly motivated stakeholders who collectively desire to make a difference in both their organization and in the region. However, the long-term success of the regional concept of operations will be dependent upon our ability to “institutionalize” the regional response concept, so that it is ultimately viewed as a routine part of our business in the emergency management and response communities.
4. **Despite our successes, an objective assessment would show that numerous agencies and organizations have not yet been “sold” on the benefits of a regional approach.** The SCTF Leadership Team continues to move forward with the large number of agencies and organizations who are willing to embrace the concept and the collective benefits it brings to the citizens of South Central Pennsylvania. While we consistently market the advantages that regionalization can bring, we have also made a conscious decision to not allow our failures to stop the forward movement of regional partnerships. Our philosophy is simple – get on the train, get off the train, or get run over by the train.
5. **The regional concept of operations must be continually marketed and validated to all of our stakeholders.** Key elements in this process include: (a) continued movement from the Pennsylvania Act 227 and DHS Homeland Security grant program terrorism focus to an all hazards perspective; (b) supporting the continued growth and maturation of all SCTF subcommittees, Strike Teams and related components; and (c) an aggressive and value-added county and regional training and exercise program.
6. **Adoption of a common incident management framework is the foundation for any successful regional response.** If SCTF-acquired equipment is the equivalent of “emergency response hardware,” then adoption, training and implementation of the National Incident Management System (NIMS) is the “emergency response software package” that provides the foundation for an effective regional

response. While we have made significant strides in facilitating the regional adoption of NIMS, additional work remains.

7. **Increased efforts are required to fully integrate volunteer agencies and organizations on a regional basis.** While there have been substantial efforts to integrate and coordinate with volunteer agencies at the county level, efforts to facilitate the collaboration of these agencies at the regional level have been “hit or miss.”