

Statement of
The Honorable Javier Gonzales
Commissioner
Santa Fe County, New Mexico
and
President
National Association of Counties
on
The Local Role in Homeland Security

Before the
United State Senate
Committee on Governmental Affairs

December 11, 2001

Senator Lieberman and members of the committee, thank you for inviting me to testify on an issue of paramount importance to counties across the country – securing our homeland against the threat of terrorism.

My name is Javier Gonzales, and I am an elected County Commissioner from Santa Fe County, New Mexico. I currently serve as President of the National Association of Counties.

The National Association of Counties (NACo) is the only national organization representing the 3,066 county governments in the United States. Our membership is comprised of counties large and small – those in major metropolitan areas as well those in rural America.

As you are now surely aware, counties are the first responders to terrorist attacks, natural disasters and other major emergencies. County public health, law enforcement, fire, and other public safety personnel are responsible for on-the-ground response and recovery action. Counties also own, operate and secure key aspects of the nation's infrastructure, such as airports, transit systems, water supplies, schools and hospitals. Elected county officials like myself, along with our emergency managers, provide the essential regional leadership, planning and coordination function in preventing, preparing for and managing our communities' response to emergency events.

In the wake of the terrorist attacks of September 11, I appointed a NACo Task Force on Homeland Security. The task force, comprised of 45 top county officials from across the country, was formed to provide a forum for county officials to advise the federal government about the roles and concerns of counties regarding homeland security; and to identify model county programs for our colleagues as we increase security measures and preparedness in our communities.

The task force has met twice this fall, and I would like to share a few

relevant outcomes from those meetings with you.

First, the importance of coordination has been a recurring theme. County officials believe it is critically important that emergency preparedness plans be coordinated and rehearsed among local, state, and federal levels, as well as across the various federal, state and local agencies with a role in emergency response.

Moreover, in the event of a public health emergency or other emergency, county officials strongly believe that the federal government should quickly identify the controlling federal authority and chain of command at the scene, and that all federal agencies diligently follow the lead of the controlling federal authority.

Finally, on the issue of coordination, NACo, along with its sister state and local government organizations, has formally requested that Homeland Security Director Tom Ridge create a State and Local Advisory Committee to the Office of Homeland Security. The committee, comprised of elected officials from state, county and city governments, would provide input and assistance to federal homeland security activities and facilitate coordination among levels of government. We have received a commitment from Governor Ridge that he will form such a committee, and we look forward to the committee being established as soon as possible.

NACo also has some specific recommendations to the federal government in the areas of law enforcement, public health and emergency planning and preparedness.

On law enforcement, it has been a longstanding concern of counties that intelligence information obtained by the federal government is not shared with appropriate local officials in a timely manner. Ultimately, this hampers our ability to track suspicious persons and prevent crimes from being committed.

In that regard, NACo has made a specific request to the Department of Justice that the composition of its newly-created Anti-Terrorism Task Forces specifically include elected representatives of county governments, and that security clearances be provided to county officials for intelligence information commensurate with their responsibilities. We have seen some progress on this front. In a letter dated November 13, Attorney General Ashcroft informed county officials that he is setting up a system to share information with state and local officials through each United States Attorneys' office. As I understand it, this system will provide a mechanism for federal intelligence to reach appropriate officials at the local level, and for information collected locally to be communicated to federal law enforcement.

In the public health area, there are two major points. First, county officials are calling on the Congress to provide adequate funding for the Public Health Threats and Emergencies Act. NACo believes that an appropriation of a minimum of \$1.8 billion is needed to implement the law fully and effectively, with at least \$835 million dedicated to building and maintaining local and state public health infrastructure.

The second point relates to information dissemination and the use of the Health Alert Network. NACo believes that the Centers for Disease Control-Public Health Practice

Program, the CDC office that best understands local dynamics, should continue to coordinate and communicate with county health departments, and that there should be a focus on improving the Health Alert Network and on assistance with technological upgrades for county health departments.

Finally, as I mentioned toward the beginning of my remarks, counties – as regional governments often encompassing many cities and towns – are in the unique position to provide the leadership, planning and coordination function needed to prevent, prepare for and manage the response to emergency events. While a survey we conducted in late September found that 95 percent of counties have emergency response plans, and 100 percent of large urban counties have both plans and mutual aid agreements with surrounding jurisdictions, there are still improvements to be made.

Since October, NACo has been calling for the authorization of a local anti-terrorism block grant at a minimum of \$3 billion. NACo believes that these funds should flow directly from the federal government to local governments, and that funding decisions under the block grant should be made countywide as an outgrowth of an existing “all hazards” emergency management planning process. The types of investments in the future to be supported by a local anti-terrorism block grant include mobile command centers, communications equipment, hazardous materials handling gear, emergency drills and other locally determined needs.

Senator Lieberman and members of the committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify about the county role in homeland security. I would be pleased to answer any questions you may have.