



## In Texas, is it homeland insecurity?

Web Posted: 09/11/2005 12:00 AM CDT

**Karisa King and Joseph S. Stroud**  
Express-News Staff Writers

When deadly chlorine gas spilled from a derailed tanker on the outskirts of San Antonio, city and county fire crews rushed in hoping to rescue trapped survivors.

But as panicked residents choked on fumes, the operation stalled for more than six hours as confusion and poor communication stymied the joint effort.

City firefighters had all the best protective gear, but weren't familiar with the terrain. County firefighters knew the terrain but lacked the gear. And neither group could talk to the other by radio.

The June 2004 chlorine spill, which killed four and injured dozens, exposed many of the same vulnerabilities as the 9-11 attacks, when police outside the World Trade Center couldn't use their radios to alert firefighters that the first tower had collapsed.

Now, more than a year after the train wreck and four years after the terror attacks, many of the lessons of 9-11 have yet to be heeded — a point driven home yet again by the sluggish relief effort along the Gulf Coast and in New Orleans after Hurricane



(John Davenport/Express-News)

Universal City Fire Department Lt. Patrick Lewis (left) and firefighter-EMT Chris Long display a hazmat trailer, chemical suit and self-contained breathing apparatus purchased with homeland security funds.



Katrina.

Texas has been widely praised for its handling of evacuees. But the problems encountered trying to protect a state with a 2,000-mile border, seaports and a massive oil and chemical plant industry reflect many of the difficulties America confronts as it copes with a new array of threats.

A hazardous materials trailer is housed at the Sandy Oaks Volunteer Fire Department. The trailer is one of four purchased by Bexar County with homeland security grant money.



(William Luther/Express-News)

Texas has spent more than \$1.4 billion in homeland security money on an effort that was supposed to make people safer, but the program has devolved into a massive spending spree undertaken with inadequate planning, coordination or accountability.

Sandy Oaks Volunteer Fire Department Chief Charlie Metzger talks about a hazmat trailer.

The result: cities and counties remain exposed in crucial areas. For example, the state has spent \$41 million on communications gear, yet many communities still can't radio one another in an emergency.

Those basic gaps spring from an approach that has not fixed core problems posed by terrorism. And with no national standards to guide them on what it means to be "prepared," communities struggle to use the new largesse wisely.

The problems suggest America is more vulnerable than people realize, even now.

### **Not weighing risks**

To qualify for homeland security money, communities first had to identify their risks. But officials who control the money in the San Antonio region have spent millions without viewing the risk reports or knowing what equipment they have on hand.

That means if disaster strikes today, counties and cities that have spent hundreds of thousands of dollars on high-tech gadgets can find help only the old-fashioned way: by picking up the phone and calling other communities one at a time.

In San Antonio, city and county firefighters still can't communicate easily by radio. The rural firefighters closest to the derailment still lack the equipment to handle a big spill. And departments have yet to train side-by-side in a full-scale

exercise that would allow them to experience some of the obstacles they might encounter in a real emergency.

In other cases, stockpiles of equipment sit in boxes and can't be used quickly in an emergency.

Local officials acknowledge some flaws, but say the vast new responsibility to gird the nation against terrorism came without a roadmap.

"It's kind of like trying to push a waterbed up the stairs," said Rasa Silenas, medical director of Texas A&M Health Science Center's Office of Homeland Security and a member of the regional committee that guides spending in the San Antonio area. "It's never going to be an attractive process."

Not that there hasn't been progress.

Emergency responders are better equipped, better trained and working together more closely than they once did, and Texas has set deadlines for getting the right tools in the hands of those who need them.

And while the spending has been haphazard, the money has opened up new worlds of technology to police, fire and health departments as well as hospitals.

Firefighters now have access to large caches of protective suits with self-contained air tanks.

At a disaster, emergency workers will strategize inside air-conditioned mobile command centers with GIS mapping systems, high-speed Internet and satellite TV. They'll use laptop computers to monitor changes in the weather, and deploy mobile decontamination tents that pop open with a few snaps.

But for all the spending, what have we bought? How much safer are we?

### **Confronting dangers**

What happened at the train derailment was "a perfect example" of the consequences of inadequate preparation, training and equipment, said Carolyn Merritt, chairwoman of the Chemical Safety Board, the federal agency that investigates industrial chemical accidents.

Merritt said a lack of planning and coordination in responding to emergencies has been more the rule than the exception in U.S. chemical accidents in recent years.

That matters in Texas, which has as many as 29 chemical plants within plume-range of at least a million people each — more than any other state in the nation, according to a report by Congressional Research Service.

"We'll find some very common things in many of our

investigations, and when that happens, that's pretty disturbing," Merritt said. "It leads you to believe we're in a bigger uncoordinated situation than maybe anybody would like to believe."

It wasn't supposed to work that way. When the Homeland Security Department was created in 2002 by combining 22 federal agencies, President Bush and members of Congress said it would lead to a more cohesive effort to keep Americans safe.

But within the past year, a growing chorus of critics has begun to question the massive new department's ability to make that happen.

An array of audits, reports and investigations has found a lack of accountability in the program, with problems ranging from airport security personnel stealing from passengers' luggage to a \$49 million overcharge by the Boeing Corp. on a homeland security contract, a finding the company disputed.

The chaotic response to Hurricane Katrina forced the administration Friday to strip oversight of the rescue effort from Michael Brown, director of the Federal Emergency Management Agency.

If planning was this bad for a disaster everyone saw coming, some wonder how the government would handle another surprise attack.

The lack of accountability has been a problem in Texas as well.

In January, a state auditor's report found "significant weaknesses" in how Texas managed its grants for police, fire and emergency workers. The state agency overseeing the program, the Texas Engineering Extension Service, failed to require communities to buy equipment they needed and didn't tie spending to performance or risk, according to the report.

Monitoring was lax. And when auditors visited sites, they discovered that many towns bought equipment that was still stacked in boxes, out of easy reach in the event of a disaster. In many cases, the money wasn't going to the people who needed it most.

At the outset, the grants were set up to push the money out swiftly to the locals, who — theoretically — knew best what they should buy.

"The strategy initially was to arm first responders with what they said they needed to address all threats — not just terrorism but all hazards," said Steve McCraw, the governor's director of homeland security.

What they needed, according to spending records, included equipment that fit everyday uses.

Thousands of dollars were used to buy binoculars, traffic cones

and flashlights. Communities spent more than \$19 million on vehicles, and since the state didn't limit how many vehicles they could buy, some spent as much as 38 percent of their grants on pickups and vans.

State auditors also found abuses of grant funds, including a Ford Excursion assigned to an executive in Weslaco and \$51,000 worth of radios Hemphill County bought from one of its own commissioners, who submitted the only bid.

In at least one instance, the abuses led to criminal charges. The Parker County emergency management coordinator and the county's purchasing agent were indicted on theft charges after a Texas Ranger found all-terrain vehicles bought with homeland security grant funds parked in their garages.

With the din of criticism growing, significant changes have been made at both the state and federal levels. Michael Chertoff, who took over as director of homeland security in February, has vowed to overhaul the agency, instilling greater accountability and tying spending more closely to real-world risks.

Similar reform efforts are under way in Texas.

In May, the governor transferred control of the state's grant program from the Texas Engineering Extension Service to his own office's Division of Emergency Management, vowing to make the programs "better, cheaper, faster," with a new emphasis on regional planning.

The state has imposed deadlines for fixing some of the key problems, including the lack of regional plans, the need for a better inventory system, and the inability of emergency workers to communicate in a crisis.

But evidence suggests there's still a long way to go.

Control of the program by the Division of Emergency Management raises new concerns.

An earlier study suggests that even before the change, the agency lacked enough people to manage its other responsibilities of handling natural disasters.

The agency has 105 people, 53 short of the number recommended for states smaller than Texas, according to a 2001 study commissioned by the Texas Senate.

McCraw said he thinks the agency has enough people to do the job, but it will add more if necessary. And even though the agency won't have more monitors than the Texas Engineering Extension Service had, he said auditors now will be posted at field offices, closer to the people they're watching.

"That's where you find things," he said. "You don't find it behind a desk."

Among the biggest reforms this year, the governor's office has sought to pull disparate local efforts together, urging communities to work more closely when they decide what to buy. The state made clear that items on the wish list would get priority if they qualify as "regional."

The problem is, nobody knows exactly what that means.

In the absence of clear guidelines, the 12-county region that includes San Antonio has been left to make up its own rules. The San Antonio region came up with a broad interpretation: as long as a piece of equipment can be moved from one town to the next, it can be counted as a regional asset.

By that definition, everything from a heat-sensing camera to a pickup to a pair of binoculars wins approval.

### **No regional plan**

An early glimpse at the new reforms came at a meeting last month, when a panel of regional leaders gathered in San Antonio to approve \$2.6 million in spending for next year.

Facing a midnight deadline imposed by the state, the group had a matter of hours to sign off on dozens of requests for equipment from communities throughout the region.

The requests on the table were difficult to interpret. At least one of the members had seen the requests only in an e-mail the day before. And those members of a subcommittee who had studied and initially approved the requests weren't at the meeting.

Discomfort surfaced almost as soon as the discussion began.

"I have a question," said Carl Mixon, a former Bexar County fire marshal. "If none of the members who voted on it are here at this meeting, so they can't tell us why they voted for or against it, how do we know what their rationale or logic was for whatever — so we can actually make a decision, ask them a question?"

Then there was the matter of how the requests would fit in with a regional plan that had yet to be developed. Beyond that, nobody knew what equipment communities already had, and few had seen any written analysis of the vulnerabilities communities faced.

So how could the panel make smart decisions about where the money should go?

"It's not a perfect process," said Don McFarland, homeland security director for the Alamo Area Council of Governments, which distributes the grant funds to San Antonio and surrounding counties. "But nor is drawing numbers out of a hat perfect, you know?"

Committee members said they relied on common sense and years of experience to guide their choices.

But without a regional plan, they settled on a definition of "regional" that was so loose it allowed them to spend money on just about anything.

For example, the panel approved \$47,000 for the Bexar County SWAT team, even though the team has received only two requests for help outside the county since 1997.

McFarland and others said they've made strides toward drafting a regional plan — a blueprint for how the many moving parts in the area would come together in a disaster — and by next year they hope to have a computerized list of equipment in the region.

McCraw said a statewide inventory system of big-ticket items already is up and running, and that everyone in Texas must be plugged in by next April.

Officials also say they are breaking down many of the old barriers to cooperation.

Police and firefighters, who once eyed each other as competitors for funds, now share equipment and information. And concerns about possible lawsuits, which used to keep cities from helping each other, have been set aside with mutual aid agreements throughout the region.

"Before, Boerne wasn't going to send anything to San Antonio, San Antonio wouldn't send anything to Boerne, Bexar County wouldn't send anything to Kendall County," said Jeff Fincke, emergency management coordinator for Kendall County. "We're a lot closer than we've ever been."

But when it comes to coordinating plans, even among emergency workers in the same county, the problems can pile up quickly. Despite the deadly lessons of last year's chlorine spill in Bexar County, the effort to prepare for another such incident remains fraught with poor planning and a lack of communication.

### **Ready to respond?**

Since the first homeland security grants became available, Bexar County has spent most of its money to build up a team that could respond to a major attack.

Emergency officials selected four local fire departments strategically placed around the county to lead the effort. Each received \$300,000 worth of hazardous materials equipment, complete with large trailers that would roll out in the event of a chemical attack or a major spill.

But more than a year after the equipment arrived, visits to those sites this summer showed that two of the four departments did

not have the trailers in working order.

In some cases, nobody knows who actually would use the gear. And some fire officials who agreed to host the caches of equipment say the county failed to pay for its upkeep.

At Leon Valley, the trailer sat empty for more than a month, with the electrical wiring torn out for remodeling. Piles of hazmat suits and air tanks sat stacked on the floor of the fire department's bay, making it impossible to use the gear without at least an hour's notice.

Since then, Chief Stan Irwin has declared the work finished and the equipment ready to go.

Another trailer at Leon Springs currently sits empty for remodeling, but in the meantime the equipment has been loaded onto another trailer.

At Universal City, the equipment had been loaded onto the trailer, but still sat in boxes, some stacked as high as the ceiling. In a rush, workers would have to scramble to open the boxes, only some of which are labeled, to find what they needed.

But that might prove to be the least of their problems.

In an emergency, Universal City Fire Chief Ross Wallace said, his department probably wouldn't respond with the county's trailer. Instead, firefighters would use a trailer parked in a neighboring town that has equipment Universal City firefighters are more familiar with.

If the county trailer is called out, Wallace said he would haul the equipment to a scene, but his firefighters wouldn't necessarily go any further. His agreement with the county gives him the option to help, but doesn't require it, he said.

"Just because I've been warehousing the equipment, I don't feel I'm obligated to respond with manpower and take on a scene," Wallace said. "If I send on-duty firefighters, I have to backfill those positions with overtime, and my community is paying for that."

As time goes on, new problems arise. Chemical testing kits that came with the trailers have expired without replacements. The county also failed to fund upkeep of the equipment, including hazmat suits and air tanks that must be tested periodically.

Some volunteer firefighters who would work inside the hazmat suits, which can get hot enough to overwhelm even the healthiest firefighters, have not received routine physicals. The grants can't be used for physicals, and the county has not yet paid for them.

Some of those who would handle the equipment complain that they lack the training to use it properly. Although city and

county hazmat teams have run through a few exercises together, joint training has been limited.

"We haven't gotten to take the actual equipment out and run a scenario together," said Charlie Metzger, chief of the Sandy Oaks Volunteer Fire Department, which houses one of the trailers.

In the first critical minutes after a chemical release, he said, there's no time for fumbling.

"We know our equipment like the back of our hand. But we don't know what San Antonio has, and vice versa, San Antonio doesn't know what we have," Metzger said.

Scott Lampright, the county's assistant emergency management coordinator, said homeland security is a relatively new program — and a work in progress.

"They've had their own exercises and we've had ours," he said. "Have we done that together? Not yet. But this is a brave new world, and we're working as hard as we can."

But one of the most critical lessons from the chlorine spill is the one that cost firefighters their lives in New York City four years ago and has arisen again in Louisiana in the hurricane's aftermath: workers in harm's way must be able to talk to each other.

### **'Problem from 9-11'**

A year ago, Mixon, the former fire marshal, told county commissioners that the need for better radios had become an urgent priority. But the effort to fix the problem soon collided with political opposition.

In his pitch, Mixon said the train wreck demonstrated clearly that the radios in use that day didn't get the job done. The county and the city were on different systems and "people couldn't talk to each other and communicate properly."

That view was shared by county firefighters, who were sidelined because they didn't have hazmat suits. Beyond that, their radios weren't high-tech enough to listen to the conversation between city rescuers.

What they did have, however, was familiarity with the brushy landscape that separated emergency crews from the trapped survivors.

If county firefighters had been using the same radios as the city, they might have steered the rescuers in the right direction, said Southwest Volunteer Fire Chief Darrell Scaper, who headed the county's local response during the wreck.

Three months later, Mixon told commissioners the radio problem could be fixed by spending \$1.3 million so county

firefighters could talk to their city counterparts.

Commissioner Lyle Larson was skeptical.

"Giving a bunch of radios out doesn't give me a sense of security," he told Mixon at the meeting.

Instead, Larson told Mixon to spend the money on decontamination equipment for city hospitals. Larson said he'd been told that hospitals needed the help.

After the meeting, Mixon approached Eric Epley, who leads an effort to prepare local hospitals for dealing with mass casualties.

"I'll be honest with you," Mixon said. "When we went to them, they said 'We have more money than we know what to do with. Why are they doing this?'"

Epley didn't dispute that account, but said the extra money wasn't wasted. The gift from the county, about \$90,000, allowed the hospitals to buy two decontamination shelters a year earlier than they'd planned.

Another chunk of the funds originally earmarked for radios went to buy a \$500,000 air filter system at the new public health lab, another project Larson defended as a worthy cause.

In an interview, Larson didn't question the importance of radios, but thought other needs were being shortchanged.

"We need to balance the spending," he said. "It seemed like we were top-heavy on a lot of the communications gear."

The direction from Larson stalled the purchase of radios. And while emergency officials recently ordered a smaller amount of better-quality digital radios, they have yet to arrive.

"If we had a major derailment today we would still have the same communications problems as a year ago," said Scaper, who was among the first to arrive at the chlorine spill.

McCraw, the state homeland security director, said the state won't tolerate that kind of breakdown much longer.

"We have to fix that problem," he said. "It's exactly the problem from 9-11."

But for Texas, that goal remains more than a year away. The state has given communities a deadline of January 2007 to be able to talk to one another easily.

McCraw said the quickest fix — buying everybody in Texas digital radios so they can talk on the same channels — would cost the state up to \$19 billion, which Texas can't afford. Instead, the state put the responsibility on local officials and gave them more time to do it.

But even if that happens, the problems with radios are just one example of basic vulnerabilities that have not been fully addressed. Despite billions of dollars in government spending, state, federal and local governments continue to scramble to reach the elusive goal of what it means to be truly prepared.

Whether they get the job done in time only will be determined in a crisis.

"I think we're safer. I think we're better prepared," Epley said. "But I don't think that's the question. The question we need to be asking is: are we as safe as we should be? Are we as prepared as people expect us to be?"

---

*kking@express-news.net*

---

Online at:

[http://www.mysanantonio.com/news/metro/stories/MYSA091105.1A.homeland\\_security.38ae808.html](http://www.mysanantonio.com/news/metro/stories/MYSA091105.1A.homeland_security.38ae808.html)