

Emergency responders face deep aid cuts

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WASHINGTON — The Bush administration intends to slash counterterrorism funding for police, firefighters and rescue departments across the country by more than half next year, according to budget documents obtained by The Associated Press.

The Homeland Security Department has given \$23 billion to states and local communities to fight terrorism since the Sept. 11 attacks, but one document says the administration is not convinced that the money has been well spent and thinks the nation's highest-risk cities have largely satisfied their security needs.

The department wanted to provide \$3.2 billion to help states and cities protect against terrorist attacks in 2009, but the White House said it would ask Congress for less than half — \$1.4 billion, according to a Nov. 26 document. The plan calls for outright elimination of programs for port security, transit security, and local emergency management operations in the next budget year. This is President Bush's last budget, and the new administration would have to live with the funding decisions between Jan. 20 and Sept. 30, 2009.

The Homeland Security department and the White House Office of Management and Budget, which is in charge of the administration's spending plans, would not provide details about the funding cuts because nothing has been finalized. "It would be premature to speculate on any details that will or will not be a part of the next fiscal year budget," OMB spokesman Sean Kevelighan said, because negotiations between the White House and the Cabinet departments over the budget are not finished.

"There's been staunch support of our department, and you'll see it again this February" when Bush's 2009 budget emerges, Homeland Security spokesman Russ Knocke predicted.

The proposal to drastically cut Homeland Security grants is at odds with some of the administration's own policies. For example, the White House recently promised continued funding for state and regional intelligence "fusion centers" — information-sharing centers the administration deems critical to preventing another terrorist attack. Cutting the grants would limit money available for the centers.

The White House's plan to eliminate the port, transit and other grants, which are popular with state and local officials, would not go into effect until Sept. 30, 2008. Congress is unlikely to support the cuts and will ultimately decide the fate of the programs and the funding levels when it hashes out the department's 2009 budget next year. The White House routinely seeks to cut the budget requests of federal departments, but the cuts proposed for 2009 Homeland Security grants are far deeper than the norm. Congress has yet to approve the department's 2008 plan.

"This budget proposal is dead on arrival," said Sen. Barbara Boxer, D-Calif. "This administration runs around the country scaring people and then when it comes to putting their money where their mouth is, they say 'sorry, the bank is closed.'"

California receives a large share of the counterterrorism money each year, and could lose more than \$200 million under the White House plan.

Boxer was particularly incensed about the proposal to end money for port security — a big concern on the West Coast. "California's ports carry over 47 percent of all goods imported into

the United States," she said. "A terrorist attack at any of California's ports could shut down our nation's port system and result in a mind-boggling loss for our nation's economy."

Bipartisan opposition to deep cuts emerged from New York, another state that would be hard hit.

"To zero out essential Homeland Security programs which have more to do with protecting Americans and fighting the war on terror than much of the money spent in Iraq shows how warped and out of touch this administration's priorities are," said Sen. Charles Schumer, a Democrat.

The proposal "goes totally in the wrong direction," said Rep. Peter King, R-N.Y. "This would be a very grave mistake, and I will do all I can to stop it."

In some years the grant program has created more ill will than security. In 2005, the administration cut by 40 percent the counterterrorism funding to New York and Washington, D.C., the two cities hit hardest on Sept. 11. New York lawmakers were furious, and the Homeland Security official in charge of the grants program eventually resigned. Since then, Homeland Security Secretary Michael Chertoff has promised to apply more common sense and less "bean-counting" in grant decisions.

The White House plan calls for massive cuts in areas where Homeland Security officials had sought increases. The department requested \$900 million for grants to U.S. cities at greatest risk of attack. But the White House only wants to provide \$400 million for that program, to be divided among no more than 45 urban areas. In 2007, Congress gave New York City \$134 million — about a third of the total amount the White House would give to the highest risk areas in the country in 2009.

While very popular in the states and among lawmakers who take credit for getting counterterrorism dollars to their districts, some of the Homeland Security grants have been criticized as wasteful or excessive.

-- \$345,000 for crashproof barriers and 60 closed-circuit cameras to monitor the University of Arkansas Razorback stadium, which local officials think could be a terrorist target.

-- \$5 million for the New Mexico Institute of Mining and Technology to buy a nearly deserted town to use for counterterrorism training.

-- \$70,000 for Huntsville, Ala. to create a fallout shelter in an abandoned mine where 20,000 people could take cover underground.

-- Several South Florida fire departments have used Homeland Security grants to beef up their gyms. Pompano Beach, Fla., spent \$220,000 on fitness equipment for a wellness program, training and physical exams.

While the White House would eliminate at least seven current Homeland Security grant programs, it would create two new grants:

-- Targeted investment grants, which would fund administration priorities such as the requirement that states create more secure driver's licenses, secure credentials for transportation employees and state and local planning for catastrophic disasters. The White House would provide \$450 million for that.

-- A \$300 million discretionary grant program for terrorism preparedness, prevention and response, which would fund specific projects instead of sending a set amount to each state.

These grants have long been debated in Congress, particularly whether a certain amount should be guaranteed to each state regardless of its risk of being attacked by terrorists. Rural lawmakers have not wanted the money to be distributed based on risk alone because it would mean their states and districts would see cuts.

In a joint statement, Sens. Joseph I. Lieberman, I-Conn., and Susan Collins, R-Maine, chairman and ranking Republican on the Homeland Security Committee, said they "urge the administration to reconsider this wrong-headed strategy."