WHAT IS OUR EXIT STRATEGY?

To the editor:

As the former Assistant Commissioner of Health for Emergency Management (EM) in New York City, I oversaw the influx of over $30 million per year dedicated to improving the New York City Department of Health & Mental Hygiene’s response to terrorism. Over the past three years, the department has hired hundreds of scientists, physicians, emergency managers, planners, and other professionals as a direct result of counterterrorism funding. This influx of dollars has been matched in local, federal, and state agencies across the country, with literally hundreds of thousands of workers in health, EM, law enforcement, and fire services employed on grant-funded lines.

Counterterrorism funds have dramatically improved US ability to prevent, detect, and respond to terrorist events. In New York City, the progress we have made is nothing short of amazing. But, as the specter of September 11th begins to fade into memories across the country (even in New York City, to a lesser extent), few expect that, given the next “crisis of the moment,” America will maintain this consistent level of counterterrorism funding over the next decade.

So, do we have an exit strategy when the funding dries up? Have we created programs that will be self-sufficient (read: self-funding)? Do we have a demobilization plan when we need to cut employees and programs?

Unfortunately, the answer seems to be a resounding “no.” This is our responsibility, it needs to be a priority, and we need to correct it now. One of the fundamental aspects of EM is planning, and part of planning includes determining the scope of our mission, defining when it is complete, and planning for an exit. Although I’m sure I will hear cries in coming years that this is the federal government’s fault, it is not. The shortcoming is solely the responsibility of state and local governments that have not engaged in even the most rudimentary form of planning—a fundamental concept on which our industry stands.

With the current system of year-to-year funding, we will be forced into a six-month exit strategy for both programs and staff. Programs will wither on the vine, as have so many other good programs like the Office for Domestic Preparedness’ weapons of mass destruction training and the US Army’s Soldier and Biological Chemical Command civilian program from a few years ago. Our staff will end up unemployed. I don’t think that is an acceptable alternative.

In my current position as program director for a Master’s degree program in EM, I’m very concerned with the long-term EM marketplace and the ability to place my smart, well-educated students in good jobs. Unless we begin to define realistic programs with realistic endpoints and a clear, coherent exit strategy to outplace employees, homeland security will continue to be a very vulnerable industry.

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Families displaced by Hurricanes Rita and Katrina can find emergency shelter, food, and medical care information from a variety of sources on a single federal site dedicated solely to hurricane relief services. The site, www.katrinarecovery.disasterhelp.gov/emergency.shtml, is part of the Disaster Management e-Government Initiative, which provides links to housing resources and emergency food programs through state and federal governments as well as information from volunteer organizations such as the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), and the American Red Cross.

Information on USDA temporary housing and medical triage centers, food sources, mental health services, the family links registry, mail service for shelter residents, and campgrounds providing no-fee sites for hurricane survivors are all available on the site. A clickable map provides links to disaster housing on a state-by-state basis at www.dhronline.org/chooseState.cfm.

DisasterHelp.gov is part of a larger initiative aimed at enhancing EM on an interagency and intergovernmental basis. The site helps users find information and services to address a wide range of emergency situations and serves five overlapping audiences: 1) local, state, and tribal governments; 2) individual citizens; 3) private sector businesses; 4) nongovernment organizations; and 5) federal agencies. The service is invaluable for political and civil service leadership, emergency managers, homeland security advisors, and first responders (fire, law enforcement, and emergency medical service professionals).