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HEADLINE: City Hall Goes to War

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DATELINE: LOS ANGELES

BODY:

Americans have always looked to the federal government for protection from enemies abroad. But the terrorists who attacked on Sept. 11 did not strike from outside. They met in San Diego parks, trained in Florida flight schools and launched their operations from domestic airports. This new enemy lives among us and attacks from our own backyard. It is therefore crucial that antiterrorism efforts include local authorities.

Yet in Washington, coordinating local-level efforts ranks low on the priority list. The president's proposal for the Department of Homeland Security puts local government and private-sector coordination in a miscellaneous section alongside Secret Service Super Bowl duties and "Non-Homeland Security Functions." Of course, federal officials have their hands full reforming the F.B.I. and integrating the 100 agencies and 88 Congressional committees and subcommittees involved in homeland security policy. But for cities and states, the message is clear: Help will not be coming any time soon.

Unfortunately, in the absence of federal guidance, local leaders have not risen to the challenge. At Los Angeles International Airport, where a gunman killed two people yesterday before being shot dead, there are more organizations responsible for passenger security (with no one person in charge of them all) than bomb-sniffing dogs. The Los Angeles Police Department has a distinguished 24-hour intelligence division but no jurisdiction to operate at the airport or the port of Los Angeles, the nation's busiest and a major potential target for terrorists.

Counterterrorism coordination problems are not confined to Los Angeles, and they are not new. In 1995, Oklahoma City officials responding to the bombing of the federal building had to send runners and meet on street corners because F.B.I., fire and police radios operated at different frequencies. Seven years later, Oklahoma still has not harmonized its emergency frequencies.

City leaders have to take responsibility for their own destiny rather than waiting for the federal cavalry. That means changing the way we think and talk about local efforts. City police, firefighters, health officials and others are not only "first responders": They are first defenders. They should be charged with the full array of counterterrorism responsibilities -- preventing terrorist attacks through law enforcement and intelligence efforts, protecting local communities and responding when disaster strikes.

To fulfill these responsibilities, local officials need to greatly improve information sharing and coordination among their own agencies. No airport in the country has a security chief who commands all the federal, local and private organizations operating on airport property. In many major cities -- including New York, Dallas, Houston, San Diego and Seattle -- seaports and airports have police departments that are separate from the metropolitan police. The reasons for this separation vary -- from union rules to jurisdictional disputes -- but they have

nothing to do with efficiency. Many regions have no coordinated disease surveillance system to help local health officials quickly diagnose and report a biological attack.

Local counterterrorism efforts should be coordinated nationwide, but that does not mean making all local programs look the same. What works in Boston may be unworkable, or unnecessary, in Boise. Instead, what local governments need is a standard ratings program that identifies counterterrorism strengths and weaknesses by city, highlights best practices and identifies critical gaps. We also need (and must ourselves implement) a communication network that links local leaders across the country so that they can share ideas and compare notes before crises erupt.

Finally, local leaders should demand a say in crafting federal counterterrorism policies. They cannot leave it to the federal government alone to seek out terrorists. Current screening procedures at airports, for example, are set by the federal government and call for random passenger searches. Local officials have an obligation to voice their opinions, if not to suggest better measures while standing up for the interests of their constituents. Raising these kinds of questions may not be politically correct, but it is politically responsible.

City officials and private sector leaders cannot assume that Washington will solve their problems. The federal government may eventually offer help, but they are the first -- and last -- line of defense for their communities. <http://www.nytimes.com>

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