

Information About the BENS Commission on the National Response Enterprise

Key Takeaway

COVID-19 has exposed weaknesses in the U.S. emergency response enterprise which threaten our Nation's security. Future large-scale crises promise untold human and economic devastation unless the President and Congress act decisively to mitigate this risk. BENS' *Commission on the National Response Enterprise* provides a roadmap for developing integrated response capabilities that effectively leverage the combined power of government, business, civil society, and every American. Its recommendations are critical to our country's resilience and should be implemented.

SUMMARY

COVID-19 has exposed critical weaknesses in America's planning and processes for responding to threats and emergencies. The components of an integrated national response capability are largely in place, but major roadblocks prevent the execution of quick, coordinated, and effective action during a prolonged crisis that simultaneously impacts every corner of the country. Unless these weaknesses are addressed, future pandemics, natural disasters, coordinated cyberattacks, or acts of terror will have enormous potential to imperil our citizens, cripple our infrastructure, threaten our economy, and put our national security at risk.

This conclusion, and the necessary steps to address these issues, are at the core of the Call to Action recently published by Business Executives for National Security (BENS). In the midst of the pandemic, BENS convened some of the United States' most accomplished leaders on this issue – from four-star generals, admirals, and former cabinet-level officials, to past and present CEOs of some of the country's most respected corporations – to research and analyze the many facets of an effective emergency response and identify opportunities for improvement.

Certain foundational principles informed the Commission's work. Foremost, truly effective emergency response will only be possible when it is powered through a seamless partnership between government, business, civil society, and the American people. In addition, the Federal government, primarily through the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), has an essential role to play in coordinating an integrated nationwide response to multi-state emergencies. Last, clear lines of communication and coordination must exist between all stakeholders – to help build trust over time among all sectors and participants.

The Commission's Call to Action offers three findings and eleven recommendations for needed improvements based on those principles, informed by our national experience during the COVID-19 pandemic. Among others, we call for the following:

- Creation of a state-of-the-art command center within FEMA for surge and supply of critical resources and human capital;
- Redesign of the National Response Coordination Center to create a resilient, inter-operable data and communications network with continuous, round-the-clock operations;
- Formation of Civilian Expertise Reserves, modeled after the National Guard, to recruit and manage a rapid response force of professionals with targeted skill sets that could be activated for service in state and federal crises;
- Providing every American with access to broadband; and
- Leveraging technology, data, and analytics to establish a common operating picture across all stakeholders, that enables well-informed, real-time decision-making capability.

Now is the time for decisive action to strengthen the Nation's resiliency before the next large-scale shock arrives. BENS and our Commissioners look forward to working with the Biden/Harris Administration, Members of the 117th Congress, state and local authorities as well as other stakeholders in industry and society to elevate our country's ability to prepare for and respond to future crises in the United States.

Select Talking Points

- COVID-19 exposed critical weaknesses in the United States' ability to deliver a rapid, coordinated response to sustained, large-scale emergencies.
- Unless these weaknesses are addressed, future emergencies of similar scale will have enormous potential to imperil our citizens, cripple our infrastructure, threaten our economy...putting our national security at risk.
- Many of the plans, processes and other components of an effective national response are already in place. The challenge is primarily with execution.
- Effective response is only possible through a seamless partnership between government, business, civil society, and every citizen.
- Trust and clear lines of communication between these stakeholders is absolutely essential.
- Examples of the recommendations of the Commission on the National Response Enterprise:
 - Successful emergency response depends on having a defined strategy in place for implementation. The Secretary of DHS should be required every two years to submit to the House and Senate Homeland Security Committees a comprehensive national strategy for emergency management;
 - Congress should expand the Stafford Act to include pandemics, cyber events, and other emergencies with possible nationwide impact;
 - FEMA should redesign the National Response Coordination Center and create a new Surge Center in order to establish state-of-the-art command centers for national emergency response;
 - An on-line, searchable inventory of state and federal crisis response roles with current contact information should be created;
 - Technology holds the key to powering an integrated national emergency response. Adoption of interoperable IT systems and the acquisition and use of emerging technologies like modern cloud and network infrastructure, AI, intelligent automation, machine learning, and blockchain are essential by all stakeholders;
 - Every American citizen must have equitable access to broadband;
 - Creation of both Civilian Expertise Reserves, modeled after the National Guard, and an online aggregator would facilitate the recruitment of civilians to assist in emergency response;
 - A leadership position should be established within DHS to oversee the development and operation of a comprehensive National Crisis Response Exercise Framework to ensure ongoing testing of emergency response systems and plans.
- Now is the time for the President and Congress to act. BENS looks forward to working with the Biden/Harris Administration, Members of the 117th Congress, state and local authorities as well as other stakeholders in industry and society to implement the Commission's recommendations.

Detailed Background Information

Mission and Structure

- Business Executives for National Security (BENS) stood up the *Commission on the National Response Enterprise* (the Commission) in June 2020.

- Its mission was to use lessons learned during the COVID-19 response to identify opportunities to strengthen and adapt U.S. plans, processes, and systems to respond to large-scale and long-duration crises.
- The Commission was co-chaired by The Honorable Jeh Johnson, Former Secretary of the Department of Homeland Security; Alex Gorsky, Chairman & CEO of Johnson & Johnson; and Mark Gerencser, former Managing Partner of Booz Allen Hamilton and Chairman of BENS.
- The Commissioners are 33 of the Nation's most accomplished leaders on these issues – from four-star generals, admirals, and former cabinet-level officials to present and former CEOs of some of the most respected American corporations.

Work Undertaken

- Working Groups of 58 senior business and industry leaders conducted 165 interviews with public, private, and civil society leaders and undertook research and analysis on the many facets of an effective national response.
- Over 90 days, they formulated recommendations focused in five specific areas (People, Supply, Surge, Roles, and Infrastructure & Economy).
- The Commission concluded that the components of an integrated national response capability are largely in place. But significant execution challenges exist, particularly when a crisis impacts numerous states simultaneously, with limited time to acquire and pre-position needed supplies and other resources.
- The Commission's final *Call to Action* report offers three findings and eleven recommendations for reimagining U.S. capabilities to effectively leverage the combined power of government, business, civil society, and every American to respond to national emergencies of this magnitude.

Findings and Recommendations

Finding 1: Facilitating Communication and Coordination *depends on the existence of a defined strategy, tested roles and responsibilities, plus shared visibility and strong relationships among all stakeholders.*

Select recommendations include:

- Congress should expand the Stafford Act to include pandemics, cyber events, and other emergencies of extended duration or with possible nationwide impacts.
- The President and other national leaders should reinforce the National Response Framework as the guiding document for all crises, with clear guidance that incident-specific response plans must be drafted to be embedded within it.
- Every two years, the Secretary of Homeland Security should be required to submit a comprehensive national strategy for emergency management to the House Committee on Homeland Security and the Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs.
- Congress should provide FEMA with the necessary authority to collect from other federal entities the financial information needed to develop an aggregate emergency response spending total, and require and annual accounting to Congress.
- The National Response Coordination Center within FEMA should be redesigned to create an interoperable data and communications network between all federal, state, and local emergency stakeholders. At a minimum, round-the-clock operations, 365 days a year should be initiated.
- FEMA's existing National Exercise Program should transition to a new leadership position within DHS with the authority to design and operate a comprehensive National Crisis Response Exercise Framework (NCREP) to continually test response emergency response plans and operations.

Finding 2: Delivering Supplies and Volunteer Resources *to the right place at the right time requires system-wide visibility of assets and clear coordination and planning of surge and supply operations. Select recommendations include:*

- Create a Surge Center within FEMA that uses emerging technologies and telecommunications capabilities to deliver real-time situational awareness, secure two-way information exchange, and shared data analytics to all stakeholders.
- Develop a secure national disaster app that offers voluntary access to features such as a map displaying current disaster and response activities, and AI-enabled predictive analytics showing future threat areas and actions needed.
- Expand the use of flexible contracting options for companies with emergency and non-emergency supplies at scale.
- Build, launch, and train Civilian Expertise Reserves modeled after the National Guard to recruit a rapid-response force of professionals with targeted skill sets that can be activated during both state and federal crises.
- Incentivize a non-profit or civil society organization that currently operates a successful volunteer database or aggregator to adapt software, hardware, and existing tools to recruit and build a roster of ready emergency response volunteers.

Finding 3: Leveraging Technology *will enable effective national emergency response capabilities in all sectors and empower every American to take part. Select recommendations include:*

- It is an economic, national security, and civic imperative that every American have guaranteed access to quality, high-speed internet at home.
- The federal government must develop a strategy, framework and secure capabilities to guide the sharing of data between stakeholders before and during times of national crisis.
- Congress should incentivize efforts to migrate state and local legacy systems to new, secure platforms capable of integration with other organizations across the National Response Framework (NRF).
- Congress should also drive and fund IT modernization by federal agencies and departments that are part of the NRF. Each should pursue a strategy which improves the efficiency, security, and resiliency of their own IT capabilities, but also prioritizes integration capability with the systems of other NRF entities.
- The Administration should develop and issue an updated National Cyber Strategy that incorporates layered cyber deterrence, resilience, supply chain risk management for internet-connected devices, “Defend Forward” operations, and industry and international collaboration as critical pillars.
- Governments at every level should pursue acquisition of emerging technologies such as AI, IoT, 5G, and blockchain, which are already demonstrating value in emergency management through enhanced capabilities, connectivity, and trust-building among stakeholders.

Implementation

- With the release of the Commission’s *Call to Action*, BENS enters a critical, second phase of work in pursuing specific policy, legislative, regulatory, and administrative changes necessary to implement the Commission’s 11 recommendations.
- We look forward to working with the Biden/Harris Administration, Members of the 117th Congress, state and local authorities as well as other stakeholders in industry and society to elevate our country’s ability to prepare for and respond to future crises in the United States.