

Plano to hire homeland director

City narrows finalists to 6 as it joins others adding security posts

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By JAKE BATSELL / The Dallas Morning News

As terrorism targets go, Plano probably isn't at the top of Osama bin Laden's list.

But the city is about to hire its first director of homeland security, joining a growing club of local governments to beef up their staffing for emergency management.

Until recently, many cities and counties were content to have fire or police departments juggle emergency planning along with their day-to-day duties. Now, the job's stature is rising.

"The profession is growing like crazy," said Kenny Shaw, director of Dallas' Office of Emergency Management, which has gone from five to seven employees since 2004.

Officials in Plano and other North Texas suburbs concede that the threat of terrorism is more acute in larger cities. But they say 9-11 and Hurricane Katrina underscored the need to have a thorough plan for any sort of emergency, be it terrorism, extreme weather or a health pandemic.

Plano, Fort Worth and Dallas are among the cities that now run emergency management out of standalone departments with growing staffs. Smaller cities are adding full-time coordinators under the fire or police departments.

"In the past, there was kind of a belief among cities that you didn't need this, or if you did, the mayor's cousin could fill that position," said David McEntire, a professor of emergency management at the University of North Texas.

"Now, there's a recognition that this is a technical field that requires a great deal of understanding," Dr. McEntire said. "You just can't leave it up to people who have no clue."

The federal government has doled out billions of dollars in homeland security grants since 9-11, and cities want their fair share. They also need a point person to coordinate the city's role on regional emergency teams.

It all adds up to higher demand for experienced coordinators who can navigate their way through a more sophisticated emergency landscape.

"These cities are stealing away my folks with emergency management degrees," said Gregg Dawson, director of emergency preparedness at the North Central Texas Council of Governments.

At least two dozen local cities, counties and other agencies have posted or filled openings in recent months, Mr. Dawson said.

Last Friday, Plano interviewed six finalists for its homeland security director, who will supervise a staff of four and earn more than \$100,000, depending on experience. City officials say they hope to name the new director by next week.

Former Fire Chief William Peterson ran Plano's emergency planning until he left this year to become regional director for the Federal Emergency Management Agency. Plano is replacing Mr. Peterson with two people – a fire chief and a homeland security director.

Mr. Peterson said that by the time he left the city, he was spending 90 percent of his time on emergency-planning duties such as state training exercises. His last few months were consumed with finding temporary housing for hurricane evacuees.

"It became real apparent that it wasn't very effective to have one person serving both roles," he said.

The federal grants that fuel the growth of these homeland security offices can have a downside. The paperwork and other administrative duties surrounding the money can distract from training exercises and disaster planning.

"It pulls your people in different directions," said Juan Ortiz, emergency management coordinator for Fort Worth and Tarrant County.

To the aspiring emergency planner who has visions of becoming the next Rudolph Giuliani, Mr. Dawson cautioned that the job is hardly glamorous.

"A lot of people getting into this think it's going to be fun and exciting -- they're going to get to chase storms and go to building collapses and see tornados and all that," Mr. Dawson said. "I can tell you, 95 percent of the time it's heavy, heavy administrative type work."

Robert Lafaye, Rowlett's emergency management coordinator, likens his job to an insurance policy.

"You do a lot of mundane things, hoping that it never happens," Mr. Lafaye said. "It's one of those things where you hope that you really never have to do your job."

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Plano city officials interviewed finalists last week for director of homeland security, a newly created position whose duties previously were handled by the fire chief. Some background on the candidates:

THE FINAL SIX

COL. BRIAN ATTAWAY

Homeland defense director, Texas National Guard, Austin

Résumé highlights: Col. Attaway is commander of the National Guard Joint Task Force for disaster response and formerly served as a military communications officer in Bosnia.

JAMES DELANEY

Emergency preparedness consultant, Palm Coast, Fla.

Résumé highlights: Mr. Delaney, a former New York City police officer, was the medical services disaster coordinator for seven counties in Florida, where he managed hurricane shelters.

PATRICK McMACKEN

Emergency management coordinator, city of Irving

Résumé highlights: Mr. McMacken, immediate past president of the Emergency Management Association of Texas, said he has landed more than \$5 million in federal grants for Irving over the past five years.

JAMIE MOORE

Emergency management director, Douglas County, Colo.

Résumé highlights: Mr. Moore, a past regional president of the International Association of Emergency Managers, has led county responses to numerous fires, tornadoes and floods.

SHANE STOVALL

Project manager, General Physics Corp., New Port Richey, Fla.

Résumé highlights: Mr. Stovall, son of former Plano City Council member Steve Stovall, was an emergency coordinator and planner for eight years in Charlotte County, Fla.

DAN SUMMERS

Emergency services director, Collier County, Fla.

Résumé highlights: Mr. Summers, who oversees a \$21 million budget in a county prone to hurricanes, also has led efforts to construct a \$40 million emergency services complex