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# A Ready and Resilient Workforce for the Department of Homeland Security

## Protecting America's Front Line



**The responsibilities of the Department of Homeland Security** (DHS) range from preventing foreign and domestic terrorist attacks; securing the nation's borders; safeguarding transportation systems; responding to natural disasters; nuclear detection; and more. Created in 2002 from a merger that rapidly incorporated parts of eight cabinet departments and 22 government agencies, DHS has struggled to integrate its numerous components and their unique cultures. While DHS is very accomplished at performing its many missions, the nature of the DHS work environment is inherently stressful, and employees suffer from low morale.

Acknowledging the tremendous burdens placed on DHS employees every day and the need to strengthen its workforce resilience program, the DHS Office of Health Affairs (OHA) asked the Institute of Medicine (IOM) to convene a committee of experts to review current workforce resilience efforts, identify gaps, and provide recommendations for a 5-year strategy to improve *DHSTogether*, the current DHS workforce resilience program. OHA staff and leadership expressed a genuine desire to support the workforce in a comprehensive way and recognized that they needed advice on how to improve their workforce resilience efforts.

The committee's report, *A Ready and Resilient Workforce for the Department of Homeland Security: Protecting America's Front Line*, stresses the importance of strong leadership, communication, measurement, and evaluation in the organization and recommends content for a 5-year plan that will promote centralized strategic direction and resource investment to improve readiness and resilience at the department.

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## Limited Resources and Data

In late 2009 and at the direction of the DHS deputy secretary, OHA created *DHSTogether*, a program intended to build resilience and wellness across DHS's many components. However, the *DHSTogether* program to date has been a series of disconnected small initiatives, lacking a vision statement, specific goals, or measurable objectives. Limited funding and lack of tasking authority means that little to no resources are tied to efforts developed by the program.

In addition, DHS currently has no working definition or validated measure for workforce resilience, and no data to determine whether previously implemented activities concerning resilience within the organization have been effective. Therefore, the committee could not be certain that the DHS workforce has a resilience deficit. The workforce may demonstrate a high level of resilience by executing their duties admirably in the face of low morale and numerous organizational challenges.

To inform its evaluation, the committee reviewed evidence gleaned from two public IOM workshops held in 2011 at the request of DHS on how to improve the *DHSTogether* program and from two meetings held by the committee to learn more about current resilience efforts at DHS. The committee also conducted site visits to several DHS component agencies

Taking into account the limited data available on the state of workforce resilience at DHS, the

committee took a broad look at potential contributing factors to workforce health, as opposed to resilience alone. It adopted the Joint Chiefs of Staff definition for *resilience*, which is “the ability to withstand, recover, and grow in the face of stressors and changing demands,” and the Department of Defense definition for *ready*, which is “the capability of an individual, unit, or system to perform the missions or functions for which it was intended or designed.”

A ready and resilient workforce has high morale, is adaptable, finds purpose and meaning in their jobs, and is productive and engaged. The committee views the DHS readiness and resilience effort as something that needs to be embedded in the core culture of DHS while maintaining the rich diversity that the component agencies bring to the organization. The committee provides seven recommendations to reach these goals (see below).

## Promoting a Unified Strategy, Common Vision, and Strong Leadership

The IOM committee concludes that DHS should use this evaluation as an opportunity for resilience efforts to get a fresh start. A rebranded resilience program should have a clear vision of a ready, resilient, and sustainable DHS workforce operating to ensure a safe, secure, and resilient nation. In addition, high visibility, involvement, support,

### Overview of Recommendations

Strategies to improve workforce readiness and resilience at DHS are:

1. Develop and promote a unified strategy and common vision for workforce readiness and resilience.
2. Clarify and expand the roles and responsibilities for workforce readiness and resilience.
3. Review and align responsibility and accountability for workforce readiness and resilience.
4. Establish a sustainable leadership development program.
5. Improve organizational communication to enhance esprit de corps, cultivate a collective culture of readiness and resilience, and align public perception of DHS with its accomplishments.
6. Develop and implement a measurement and evaluation strategy for continuous improvement of workforce readiness and resilience.
7. Implement a 5-year strategic plan for workforce readiness and resilience.

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and accountability from all levels of leadership at DHS are necessary for the program's success.

To achieve this vision, the committee recommends that the Secretary of DHS review the current roles, responsibilities, accountability, and authorities for workforce readiness and resilience at DHS, and ensure that resources are available to build and maintain this effort. The administrator of workforce readiness and resilience should be charged with the design, implementation, and execution of the long-term strategic plan—with bottom-up input from each component—tasked with assessing effectiveness of the effort, and report annually to the Secretary on the state of DHS's workforce resilience and readiness efforts.

Strong leadership at all levels within DHS is an essential part of building a resilient workforce, and the committee recommends that DHS create a leadership development program—distinct from management skills training—to train leaders appropriate to their level of responsibility. This training program should include mentorship; sponsorship, which helps identify promising new leaders and establish relationships for them with senior leaders; objective ways to identify employees with high potential; creation of leadership opportunities; and evidence-informed measurement of leadership performance.

### **Improving Communication**

Clear and consistent communication efforts—beginning with top leadership and filtering down through the rest of the organization—is essential for instilling a culture of readiness and resilience

across DHS. The committee finds that many in the DHS workforce are unaware of the resilience and wellness resources available to them or may think that accessing these services will adversely affect their positions, security clearance, or suitability; this results in barriers to seeking help at DHS.

To remedy this problem and to increase employees' sense of pride and unity in the organization, the committee recommends that DHS develop and implement a strong and diverse communications strategy for both internal and external relations. Communications should enhance two-way information dissemination, build the public's perception of DHS's accomplishments, and promote the DHS workforce's knowledge about and confidence in the availability of resources that enhance individual and workplace health, readiness, and resilience.

### **Implementing, Measuring, and Evaluating a Strategic 5-Year Plan**

With no common metrics, strategy, or framework to monitor employee resilience, wellness, or other relevant measures, DHS lacks a comprehensive view of the resilience, readiness, and health of its workforce. The committee recommends development and implementation of a measurement and evaluation strategy that will support execution, evaluation, and continuous improvement of a 5-year strategic plan. Evaluations should focus on structure, process, and outcome measures; utilize a core set of measures to be used DHS-wide; establish a database; put in place clear program goals and timelines that can be monitored; use evidence



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Department of Homeland Security Office of Health Affairs

to inform resource allocation; and communicate its findings regularly throughout the agency.

The 5-year plan should be formed using goals and strategies outlined in the IOM’s report and input from component agencies, with longer-term goals embedded to achieve a ready and resilient workforce able to face the high demands of their crucial mission. The committee stresses that the program’s success will require collaboration, input, and commitment from all DHS divisions.

**Conclusion**

Every day, DHS carries out important work that contributes to the safety of the United States and furthers the formation and maintenance of a resilient nation. In order to remain effective at this essential task and to attract the most qualified workers to help fulfill its mission, DHS requires a ready and resilient workforce.

While all DHS component agencies share a common mission, each have distinct roles with different stressors attached, making implementation of an organization-wide resilience or wellness program difficult. The IOM committee’s recommendations outline how DHS can focus its efforts on creating a common culture of workforce readiness and resilience, while recognizing the distinct, proud, celebrated cultures of its component agencies. 

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