

Colorado Homeland Security Makes Big Improvements

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DENVER – Federal, state and local officials say Colorado's Department of Homeland Security is no longer a disaster, but the real test will come during the Democratic National Convention.

The comments were made during a summit of local, state and federal Homeland Security officials at the State Capitol on Monday.

"The governor and the state are here on the case, we have a very strong leader in Major General Mason Whitney, there's a lot of teamwork and there's a spirit that this is going to be done right," said Rep. Mark Udall (D-Colorado). "The convention here next month gives us a chance to try out our systems and we'll be ready."

Past state and local audits found the department was mismanaged and some of the grant monies were spent in questionable ways. However, since Gov. Bill Ritter (D-Colorado) reorganized the department, officials say there have been big improvements.

"Colorado was severely criticized both in state audits which we did internally, as well as federal audits, for mismanaging funds," said Rep. Ed Perlmutter (D-Colorado). "It looks to me like we've really improved, making sure that we are prepared and we've developed strategies for this state and that we use the funds that are given under grants wisely."

In February 2008, Homeland Security entities were put under one department under the leadership of Whitney and former State Auditor Joanne Hill. Since then, the department has completed its state strategy that assesses and prioritizes law enforcement needs and put monitoring systems in place to handle the grant funds, according to Whitney.

Under the new homeland security department, local, state and federal cooperation during recent disasters such as the Windsor tornado has been outstanding, according to officials.

"That was as good as it gets," said Gary Briese, DHS/FEMA Region 8 administrator when talking about the Windsor tornado response.

"We always hope disasters don't strike, but they do. So, we must always be prepared," said Ritter.

While the department was praised for making changes, local police and fire officials requested even more. They want more money for local agencies that are managing the grant monies and more local control over how the grants are spent.

Several officials also complained about the federal and state grant applications changing every year, making it difficult to understand the process and gather the requested material for the applications on deadline.

Local law enforcement plans to test their interoperability and cooperation during the Democratic National Convention next month.

Arapahoe County Sheriff Grayson Robinson assured officials that first responders won't have a problem communicating by radio during the DNC as they did during the Columbine shootings on April 20, 1999.

"As I stand before you today, I tell you that we can talk, we can communicate," said Robinson.

The U.S. Department of Homeland Security will conduct another audit of Colorado's Homeland Security department after the convention to ensure that the state is staying on track.

This year, Colorado will receive \$20.8 million in federal Homeland Security grants, which is almost \$1 million more than last year.

"This is great news for Colorado," said Ritter. "These federal funds are vital to our overall homeland security mission. They will allow the state to continue building strong partnerships with local agencies so that we can improve our ability to prevent, deter, respond to and recover from many types of incidents."

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