



## U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HOMELAND SECURITY

### Homeland Security Advisory Council

September 16, 2009

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Secretary Janet Napolitano  
U.S. Department of Homeland Security  
Washington, DC 20528

Dear Madame Secretary:

On July 14, 2009, you directed the Homeland Security Advisory Council (HSAC) to establish a task force to assess the effectiveness of the Homeland Security Advisory System (HSAS) and to recommend ways to improve that system. With a timeline of sixty days, the task force held three meetings, met with subject matter experts including former Secretaries Ridge and Chertoff, and read hundreds of pages of materials compiled by DHS staff, in preparing the attached recommendations.

Each member believes there is erosion of public confidence in the current system. As to whether to retain some form of the nation's current color code system, the task force is divided. Though we believe the current system to be outdated and in need of reform, half of the Task Force membership believes the concept of color-coded alerts is sufficiently clear, powerful, and easily understood. By equal number, the Task Force membership believes the color code system has suffered from a lack of credibility and clarity, such that it should be abandoned in favor of another graduated system. However, the Task Force members are unanimous, that if you decide to retain a system of alerts utilizing colors, substantial reform is required.

The task force identified six major themes in presenting their recommendations.

- 1) In the view of the Task Force, a national threat warning system solely for terrorist attacks is as central now as it was when today's system was established in 2002.
- 2) The Task Force members agreed that there are two primary audiences for the Homeland Security Advisory System: the public and an institutional audience which includes the federal government, state and local governments, and the private sector. The current system has functioned reasonably well for the institutional audience in recent years, especially as alerts have become more targeted geographically and to specific sectors; however, improvements are needed. In addition, the system's ability to communicate useful information in a credible manner to the public is poor.

- 3) The Task Force members agreed that, at its best, there is currently indifference to the Homeland Security Advisory System and, at worst, there is a disturbing lack of public confidence in the system.
- 4) In the judgment of the Task Force, a central undermining feature of the current alert system is that the threat level more easily moves up than comes down. As it is institutionally difficult for the Department to lower a threat level, the Secretary should consider a forcing mechanism by which alert status defaults to “guarded” within 15 days in the absence of intelligence to remain at an elevated level.
- 5) The task force called for greater precision in identifying the specific local governments, first responders and private-sector companies threatened and the protective measures that necessitate a response. We are also recommending the revisions of the system to narrowly target specific regions and sectors under threat, avoiding elevating the alert status of the nation as a whole.
- 6) The Homeland Security Alert System will require more of a dedicated infrastructure, staff, established protocols and procedures than it does currently.

Additionally, HSAC noted during its discussion of the HSAS report that risk communication is an active area of research. Indeed, the recommendations with regard to providing threat specifics to the public, to the extent allowed by security considerations, and post-threat explanations reflect the results of that research. The HSAC urges the Department of Homeland Security to continue to stay abreast of and involved in ongoing research in risk communication and to factor it into future alert protocols.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "William Webster", with a stylized flourish at the end.

**William Webster**  
Chair, Homeland Security Advisory Council