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# The Department of Homeland Security Unity of Effort Initiative

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## Executive Summary

In late 2014, the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) hosted two not-for-attribution roundtable discussions with current and former senior Department of Homeland Security (DHS), industry, and think tank officials to explore Homeland Security Secretary Jeh Johnson’s “unity of effort initiative,” offer insights and experiences, and develop practical recommendations to help the department achieve the initiative’s stated goals: to deepen understanding of the DHS mission space and empower the department’s components to effectively execute their operations. After identifying and discussing three overarching challenges—cultural resistance, availability of training resources, and career development opportunities—the roundtable participants highlighting seven principal areas for action: (1) a focus on individuals who can drive change; (2) a robust exchange or liaison “intra-DHS” program; (3) the potential for private-sector rotations; (4) amending standards for the Security Administration job series; (5) more focused formal engagement with career civil servants; (6) a periodic training seminar; and (7) the power of informal forums. This paper outlines key steps to implement recommendations within each of these areas.

## Introduction

Since its creation in 2002, the Department of Homeland Security has undertaken numerous reviews and undergone several reorganizations in an ongoing effort to increase the department’s efficiency and effectiveness in managing its wide-ranging, complex set of missions. In April 2014, Secretary of Homeland Security Jeh Johnson directed DHS leadership to make several key changes to “transparently incorporate DHS Components into unified decision-making processes and the analytic efforts that inform decision-making.”<sup>1</sup>

The secretary indicated that the overarching goal of this new effort is two-fold: to deepen understanding of the DHS mission space and to empower the department’s components—

<sup>1</sup> Jeh C. Johnson, “Strengthening Departmental Unity of Effort,” memorandum for DHS leadership, April 22, 2014, 1, <http://www.hlswatch.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/04/DHSUnityOfEffort.pdf>.

including the Federal Emergency Management Agency, U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, U.S. Coast Guard, U.S. Customs and Border Protection, U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement, and U.S. Secret Service—to effectively execute their operations. Senior DHS officials have referred to these changes collectively as the “unity of effort initiative,” a shorthand phrase for “building within DHS the foundation of the way that the leadership of the Department steers the Department as an organization.”<sup>2, 3</sup>

Congress and the broader homeland security community have welcomed this initiative and stressed the importance of developing and implementing a systematic approach that emphasizes strong management and integrated processes. One expert noted that while unity of effort issues received some attention since the department’s creation, “too often [that attention] has been episodic and *ad hoc*...What has been missing in the last decade has been a sustained and institutionalized set of processes.”<sup>4</sup> This initiative appears to focus on addressing this gap.

In late 2014, CSIS hosted two not-for-attribution roundtable discussions with key subject matter experts, including current and former high-ranking DHS officials, to explore the unity of effort initiative, offer insights and experiences, and develop practical, actionable recommendations for ways in which the department can pursue the initiative’s stated objectives.

Against the backdrop of challenges (e.g., tightening budgets, low morale, complex oversight structures), this paper examines key issue areas that DHS leaders must address in order to achieve department-wide unity of effort.<sup>5</sup> Roundtable participants discussed the historically flagging morale of DHS employees and ways DHS could improve its workforce. Participants also explored how the department could effect a cultural shift toward a more whole-of-department approach (vice component-specific). To be successful, any reform movement must adequately address these challenges. This paper outlines several recommendations for practical steps that DHS leaders can take to implement positive change in morale, workforce, and culture issue areas.

## Key Challenges

There are several challenges to the DHS unity of effort initiative. According to the latest annual federal employee survey administered by the Office of Personnel Management (OPM), the department ranks lowest among cabinet agencies on several indices measuring items such as leadership and knowledge management, results-oriented performance culture, talent

<sup>2</sup> Participant, not-for-attribution workshop hosted by CSIS, October 8, 2014.

<sup>3</sup> The April memo and subsequent guidance identified specific focus areas and tasks. For example, creation of a regular DHS Senior Leaders Council to allow component heads and other senior officials to engage directly with the secretary and the deputy secretary on policies, strategy, operations, and guidance; a review of DHS’s principal acquisition management directive (Directive #102-01) to link department strategies, requirements, resource allocation, investments, plans, and program execution; harmonization of DHS strategy, planning, and analytic capability to develop a comprehensive picture of the department’s mission responsibilities and functional capabilities, identify gaps or inconsistencies, and frame choices; and development of options for enhancing DHS homeland security mission effectiveness internationally. Johnson, “Strengthening Departmental Unity of Effort,” 1–5.

<sup>4</sup> Christian Beckner, “New DHS Secretary tackles ‘Unity of Effort,’” *Homeland Security Watch*, April 23, 2014, <http://www.hlswatch.com/2014/04/23/new-dhs-secretary-tackles-unity-of-effort/>.

<sup>5</sup> Jeh C. Johnson, “The Secretary’s Vision for the Future—Challenges and Priorities,” testimony before the House of Representatives Committee on Homeland Security, February 26, 2014, [www.dhs.gov/news/2014/02/26/written-testimony-dhs-secretary-jeh-johnson-house-committee-homeland-security](http://www.dhs.gov/news/2014/02/26/written-testimony-dhs-secretary-jeh-johnson-house-committee-homeland-security).

management, job satisfaction, and employee engagement.<sup>6</sup> Of the 19 large agencies analyzed in the Partnership for Public Service’s annual “Best Places to Work in the Federal Government” survey, DHS ranked lowest in both 2013 and 2014.<sup>7</sup>

It is too facile to say that these rankings reflect only the low morale and lack of mission focus that have historically plagued DHS headquarters. In discussing how to help the unity of effort initiative to succeed, workshop participants generally believed that the surveys highlighted *three overarching challenges*.

1. *Cultural resistance*. There appears to be strong cultural resistance to approaching homeland security in a cohesive, unified fashion across the department’s components and offices. The 2014 Quadrennial Homeland Security Review directed the department to identify “clear, risk-informed priorities over the next four years that will drive operational planning, analysis of resource and capability options, and sound acquisition decisions.”<sup>8</sup> While Secretary Johnson provided guidance to help unify department-wide actions, changing the culture of any organization ranks among the most difficult, time-intensive leadership challenges. Organizational culture change necessarily involves shifting individuals’ attitudes and assumptions and requires sustained, high-level attention, in some cases over several years (and thus over the tenures of multiple political appointees within the federal executive branch). Within the DHS context, such change may be particularly difficult, given the wide-ranging missions and diverse histories of the components and offices and past DHS leaders’ attempts to bring together these various entities over the last decade. In fact, some policy experts have called for a “Goldwater-Nichols Act” for DHS, citing the 1986 law that compelled the Department of Defense to become a more unified organization; those experts acknowledge that almost 30 years and numerous combat operations later, the military departments are still actively endeavoring to become less single service-oriented and more “joint.” Formed from 22 agencies only 13 years ago, DHS is still only beginning to address the cultural differences among the disparate elements and to develop a more whole-of-department (vice component-specific) approach. Such an effort will need to survive beyond the current DHS leadership.
2. *Perceived struggle to provide adequate training resources*. There is a perceived struggle to provide adequate resources for training headquarters personnel, including incoming decisionmakers and mission support activities. For example, a new political appointee may lack basic information on how his or her component or office functions during day-to-day operations or how it contributes to the overarching mission of the department. Moreover, the high-paced work environment and considerable number of high-level vacancies hinder a personnel approach that values training, particularly courses that take place outside of the national capital region (e.g., OPM’s Management Development Course). Further, the unity of effort’s portfolio teams (e.g., aviation commonality,

<sup>6</sup> U.S. Office of Personnel Management, “2014 Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey,” agency ratings, <http://www.fedview.opm.gov/2014/Ranking/>.

<sup>7</sup> Partnership for Public Service, “Best Places to Work in the Federal Government,” agency rankings, <http://bestplacestowork.org/BPTW/rankings/overall/large>.

<sup>8</sup> U.S. Department of Homeland Security, “DHS Releases Second Quadrennial Homeland Security Review,” press release, June 19, 2014, <http://www.dhs.gov/news/2014/06/19/dhs-releases-second-quadrennial-homeland-security-review>.

chemical/biological/radiological/nuclear detection) will require a discrete set of specialized skills that could require increased focus to develop further in the public sector. Workshop participants also expressed concern with DHS's attempts to reduce headquarters personnel training and investment in mission support in the name of cost efficiency; the former can damage office efficiency and mission achievement, while the latter may cripple operational capabilities and drive mission support employees into the private sector. For example, as part of the president's fiscal year (FY) 2014 budget request, the department highlighted its objective to realize efficiencies and streamline operations through "a variety of initiatives to cut costs, share resources across components and offices, and consolidate and streamline operations wherever possible. In FY 2014, these initiatives will result in \$1.3 billion in savings from administrative and mission support areas, including contracts, information technology (IT), travel, personnel moves, overtime, directed purchasing, professional services, and vehicle management."<sup>9</sup>

3. *Career development for DHS employees.* In interpreting OPM's federal employee surveys for recent years, reports note that employees have left DHS "at a rate nearly twice as fast as in the federal government overall, and the trend is accelerating... The departures are a result of what employees widely describe as a dysfunctional work environment, abysmal morale, and the lure of private security companies paying top dollar that have proliferated in Washington since the Sept. 11, 2001 attacks."<sup>10</sup> Because demand has consistently increased for homeland security expertise (e.g., cybersecurity, infrastructure protection), it can be difficult for DHS to retain a capable workforce as employees turn toward better-paying opportunities in the private sector. Not only can such turnover throughout an organization adversely impact mission achievement, it can also, according to some reports, prove costly as the department deals with vacancies, less-qualified personnel, or outsourcing.<sup>11</sup> Workshop participants did note that many DHS employees may find a certain level of job satisfaction through a desire for public service. Such employees might welcome the opportunity to rotate between government service and the private sector in order to hone needed expertise, stay competitive, and advance within the organization over time. Unfortunately, it appears that the classification standard for the Security Administration job series (General Schedule 0080) has not been updated since December 1987 and is woefully inadequate for describing the requisite skill set and knowledge areas for today's rapidly evolving homeland security environment.<sup>12</sup> Moreover, there is currently no practical mechanism by which homeland security professionals could rotate between sectors. Finally, experts noted that DHS leaders must do a better job of listening to their employees, especially career civil

<sup>9</sup> U.S. Department of Homeland Security, "Budget-in-Brief, Fiscal Year 2014," 9, <http://www.dhs.gov/sites/default/files/publications/MGMT/FY%202014%20BIB%20-%20FINAL%20-508%20Formatted%20%284%29.pdf>.

<sup>10</sup> Jerry Markon, Ellen Nakashima, and Alice Crites, "Top-level turnover makes it harder for DHS to stay on top of evolving threats," *Washington Post*, September 21, 2014, [http://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/top-level-turnover-makes-it-harder-for-dhs-to-stay-on-top-of-evolving-threats/2014/09/21/ca7919a6-39d7-11e4-9c9f-ebb47272e40e\\_story.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/top-level-turnover-makes-it-harder-for-dhs-to-stay-on-top-of-evolving-threats/2014/09/21/ca7919a6-39d7-11e4-9c9f-ebb47272e40e_story.html).

<sup>11</sup> Howard Risher, "Front-Line Morale Problems are Threatening Homeland Security," *Government Executive*, September 30, 2014, <http://www.govexec.com/management/2014/09/front-line-morale-problems-are-threatening-homeland-security/95441/>.

<sup>12</sup> For more information about this job series, please see <http://www.opm.gov/policy-data-oversight/classification-qualifications/classifying-general-schedule-positions/standards/0000/gso080.pdf>.

servants who have spent several years with one particular office; few people will stay in an organization if they feel ignored or underappreciated, regardless of compensation.<sup>13</sup>

## Conclusion and Recommendations

Within the context of a department-wide unity of effort initiative, addressing these three overarching challenges—cultural resistance, lack of training and investment, and lack of career development—present a real opportunity to focus DHS personnel on mission responsibilities and functional capabilities. The new unity of effort initiative can enhance coordination and cooperation and should emphasize early successes to establish momentum.

As the secretary and other senior leaders discuss strategies, requirements, resource allocations, investments, and similar issues, they may well consider several practical steps that could improve the DHS workforce. While workshop participants acknowledged potential resource implications and the time required to effect real change, they generally agreed that department leadership should consider:

1. **A focus on individuals, who can drive change.** For Secretary Johnson’s unity of effort initiative to be successful, the department must identify and cultivate both current and future leaders, who may already be in federal service; these individuals might need encouragement to remain in government positions and further hone their skills in order to help the department achieve its missions going forward. This issue of leader development is not specific to DHS, of course, but as the secretary promotes unity of effort throughout the department, it is worth focusing on future leaders who can continue to emphasize the importance of a common understanding of the DHS mission space, unified decisionmaking processes and analytic efforts, and effective execution of operations;
2. **A robust exchange or liaison “intra-DHS” program.** Offering employees the opportunity to complete substantive rotations outside of their home office or component—similar to the U.S. military’s requirements for “joint,” career-broadening experiences—can help foster a better understanding of each other’s missions, needs, and requirements, as well as the department’s mission as a whole. If implemented between headquarters and operational components, rotations would afford planners and program managers an opportunity to think through challenges outside of their own experience—whether operational or strategic;
3. **The potential for private-sector rotations.** While a participating employee would need to agree to a follow-on commitment in order to share their lessons learned and to prevent “brain drain,” such a program could use existing long-term training opportunities—such as command and staff or war college programs—as templates for

<sup>13</sup> It is worth noting that after OPM released its annual survey results, Secretary Johnson and Deputy Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas reportedly sent a department-wide e-mail, noting that the survey would “catalyze” their efforts to address morale problems. See Jerry Markon, “DHS morale sinks further despite new leadership at the top, survey shows,” *Washington Post*, October 10, 2014, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/federal-eye/wp/2014/10/10/dhs-morale-problems-grow-worse-during-secretary-johnsons-brief-tenure/>.

encouraging DHS employees to spend a brief time (e.g., one year) in a private, homeland security–focused company;

4. **Building upon components’ experience in reviewing classification standards and amending standards for the Security Administration job series** in such a way that: (a) allows for flexible requirements that can adapt to evolving job requirements; and (b) better defines promotion and advancement requirements for those individuals within the series. This review may well result in what one reporter called “a separate occupational pay system similar to the law enforcement officer system, with the flexibility to stay competitive,”<sup>14</sup> but before such a determination is made, it would be useful to begin with a review of the existing GS-0080 series;
5. **More focused formal engagement with career civil servants.** Great ideas can often come from within the department, as well as from outside experts and the private sector. The DHS Senior Leaders Council and other forums in which senior leaders discuss issues with each other are important, but given the historically low—and apparently worsening—morale among DHS employees at all levels, leaders should consider how best to empower civil servants, benefit from their collective knowledge and experience, and operationalize change that can better enable the department to achieve its missions while also increasing job satisfaction and talent management. For example, a small (e.g., 30 person) advisory council with a semiformal structure could allow interested civil servants from a representative cross-section of the department to share particular points of view (or interpret a challenge with a different framework than their colleagues) directly with senior leadership;
6. **A periodic training seminar** to help provide new political appointees the information they need to be successful early on. Such a seminar could be similar to programs that educate newly elected congressional officials on procedures and personnel and should at least elucidate DHS strategies, requirements, resource allocations, investments, plans, and programs, clarify how each agency contributes to the department’s mission responsibilities and functional capabilities, and help appointees understand expectations. One goal of this training would be to reduce friction between new appointees and their careerists, who may sometimes feel they are being dictated to and not led; and
7. **The power of informal forums.** Under the unity of effort initiative, DHS leaders should encourage the development of informal forums that introduce individuals, missions, capabilities, and focus areas across agency with the understanding that if people know each other, they may prove more willing to cross agency lines and cooperate on a given project. As people interact with each other more, it may prove easier for headquarters to identify key players and get them onboard with new initiatives early.

Absent a catalyzing event, government bureaucracies are known to be slow agents of change. Since 2002, DHS has struggled to develop an organizing concept that encompasses disparate missions ranging from federal emergency management and domestic nuclear detection to border security and immigration and that reflects an ability to work effectively with state, local,

<sup>14</sup> Risher, “Front-Line Morale Problems are Threatening Homeland Security.”

territorial, tribal, federal interagency, nongovernmental, private-sector, and even international partners. Secretary Johnson's current initiative to unify department-wide efforts through process integration, new and revitalized management structures, and support to components is useful toward this end.

Unity of effort requires more than processes and policies. True unity of effort must rest upon a full complement of civil servants, political appointees, and contract support who are invested in the department's success, who understand the overall mission, and who fulfill their responsibilities in achieving that mission. Small, incremental steps—such as those concepts described above—could set DHS for longer-term cultural shift, improved morale, and sustainment of a dedicated workforce.

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