

In emergency, what will Washington do?

Government offices need a plan B

Rep. Tom Davis

Thursday, the House considered a measure laying out the framework for how Congress would continue operating in the event of a terrorist attack or catastrophe that kills a many members.

This is important work but let's be honest: The real, day-to-day work of the federal government does not happen in Congress — it happens in the offices of the Social Security Administration, the hospitals run by the Veterans Affairs Department, at the ports protected by the Customs and Border Patrol. It happens at agencies and offices spread across our nation. It is the continued operations of executive branch agencies that will make a real, tangible difference in the lives of Americans should the unthinkable happen.

Evaluating the progress

That is why, as chairman of the Government Reform Committee, I have been keeping a close eye on the continuity of operations plans of the federal government. Upon learning last year the disappointing news that not one agency had a fully implemented continuity plan, I asked the Government Accountability Office to continue to evaluate the progress of the largest federal civilian agencies, as well as agencies that handle critical func-

tions, such as food safety disease monitoring.

While some progress has been made recently, the sad fact is that we have a long way to go. I cannot say with much confidence that our federal agencies could continue to function effectively in the wake of a disaster.

No plans

The GAO reported some troubling information to my committee this week. Specific department names were removed for security reasons, but the overview is disturbing enough:

- Two of the government's 23 largest agencies have no written continuity plan at all.

- Most agencies and offices surveyed still have not identified what their core functions are (this is an obvious and fundamental first step in developing a plan for continuity of critical services).

- Only three agencies have considered the use of telework as a strategy to continue operations should the main office be shut down or inaccessible (this is inexcusable, given the various non-terrorist situations — blizzards, hurricanes, transportation bottlenecks caused by tractor-driving farmers — that have made downtown D.C. off limits in recent years).

- While most continuity plans recognize the need for agencies to have backup communications systems, access to vital records necessary to support essential functions and regular training of personnel, almost none have demonstrated that these capabilities or processes exist.

Disheartening, alarming

These results are disheartening at best, alarming at worst. I am particularly concerned that several of the agencies that received low marks from the GAO are ones whose operations are vital to our citizens in times of national security crisis.

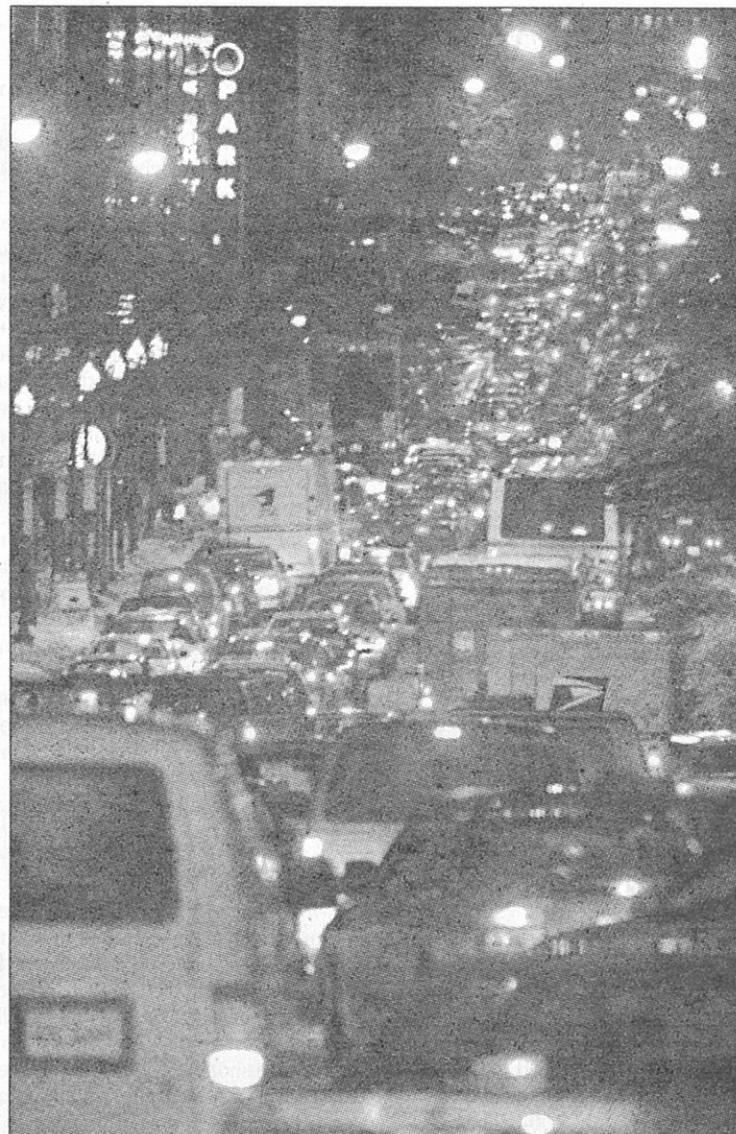
The Government Reform Committee will continue to hold agencies feet to the fire until we see results. We will continue to prod the Federal Emergency Management Agency and others with oversight responsibility for continuity plans to hold inter-agency emergency exercises (like the successful one FEMA held last May) and stress the importance of training.

And we will continue to push for the federal government to commit in a meaningful way to telework — a simple, cost-effective way not only to prepare for a catastrophe, but to improve employee morale and productivity and reduce highway congestion.

Yes, we need to consider the necessity of congressional succession. It's a critical part of assuring the public that their government will continue in the face of any catastrophe.

But we cannot overlook the need to ensure the continuity of the agencies that provide necessary and sometimes life-saving services each day to the American people. Our fellow citizens are counting on it.

Tom Davis, R-Va.-11th, is the chairman of the House Government Reform Committee.



Joe Marquette/AP

Long into the Washington rush hour, cars block a main intersection in the downtown area on Jan. 16, 1996. Ten days after a major blizzard buried the city, streets were still clogged with snow and traffic lanes were blocked.