Interview: Richard Cañas, Director, New Jersey Office of Homeland Security and Preparedness

Richard “Dick” Cañas was tapped in March 2006 to head the state’s newly-established Office of Homeland Security and Preparedness. Cañas began his career as a police officer Salinas, California, and in 1972 joined the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration, where he would serve for the next 24 years. In 1990 NSC President George H. W. Bush nominated Cañas to the National Security Council, where he was director for counternarcotics and counterterrorism. In 1994 Cañas became the DEA’s Special Assistant to the Latin American section of the Central Intelligence Agency and was then assigned to the DEA’s Phoenix, Arizona Divisional Office as Special Agent in Charge. From 1996 to 1998, Cañas headed the National Drug Intelligence Center (NDIC) at Johnstown, Pennsylvania, then worked as a Director at the nonprofit Concurrent Technologies Corporation, which develops technology and open source information to support the country’s emergency response community. Cañas is a graduate of the California State University at San Jose.

What are the basic responsibilities of your job? What is a typical day or week like?

My basic responsibilities, I would say, are prevention and preparedness. Prevention in the sense that we have an operational responsibility—meaning a law enforcement coordination mission—for counterterrorism, and an intelligence collection and coordination mission. Prevention is the long pole in the tent. It’s everything from soup to nuts: mega disasters, preparing for those, which are the toughest, in which I would include a nuclear attack, a pandemic, a hurricane hitting the coast of New Jersey, and cyberterrorism. Those are big huge disasters, which would deplete or rather have tremendous consequence. And it takes an awful lot of resources and funding to adequately prepare. But then, of course, we do all of the smaller stuff that encompasses critical infrastructures, of which there is about 27 different sectors. That coordination with the private sector and the public sector is really the one that eats up a lot of the time. So an average day here is meetings, meetings, meetings on all of those subjects, because we’re not necessarily an operational agency. Our mission is really to coordinate—to make sure that the agencies charged with the mission are doing their job and have the resources that they need.

Your agency is relatively young. How does it divide responsibilities with the state Office of Emergency Management?

Well we don’t divide—we oversee the Office of Emergency Management, which is run by the State Police. They are the state agency that would respond to any state emergency. They have a dual reporting role to my office, and also to the state attorney general because, as I say, they happen to be the state police. In that regard, we divide up the roles as far as what they do: they do the operations, they do the deployments they do the crisis management. Our job is to do policy and planning.
How has your background helped you on the job?

My background is primarily law enforcement; and, in the latter part, intelligence, criminal and counter-terrorism; counter-drug as well. And the law enforcement part was primarily counter-drug. Then I spent a considerable amount of time in the private sector working on contracts, with primarily the (federal) National Guard Bureau, doing information sharing projects for the first response community across the county. So all of that experience has now paid great dividends because I was able to stay current. And I also have an historical background having fought another quote-unquote “war,” the Drug War. There were very similar policy planning requirements because the force multiplier was the interagency process, which not all law enforcement works to perfection. But that is the primary method to develop policy and planning: through an interagency mechanism. You can’t do it in a silo. And I spent four years on the National Security Council at the White House, and that’s primarily how they conduct business, and that has helped a lot. Because they that they are not operational per se. Our job is to ensure that other people are doing theirs.

What’s been the biggest challenge in your job?

I would say there are several. I guess recognizing the difference between mega-disasters and the ones that are more risk-based; the analysis of that, and being able to make those calls on a daily basis. Prioritizing where you’re going to put resources and funding since we’re the (State Administrative Agency) for the state on counter-terrorism, a lot of that responsibility falls on me.

What surprised you most on the job?

The biggest surprise is a good one, frankly. It’s how far we have come since the days when I was operational in intelligence and investigations. When I left the government in 1998, the idea of information sharing between the federal government and the state and local levels was pretty sad. And indeed that was one of the top criticisms from the 9-11 Commission. What I was pleasantly surprised to see is that right now, we have opportunity—from the state and local level—to work shoulder-to-shoulder with the federal government, primarily the FBI, on counterterrorism efforts. Our people are placed in all three of the Joint Terrorism Task Forces that affect New Jersey: the one in New York City, the one in Newark, and the one in Philadelphia. We have the opportunity to see the same type of intelligence that the federal government has always held to itself pretty tightly. It was a very pleasant surprise that they have in fact crossed that bridge. We’re not entirely there, but it’s a dramatic change from when I left government.

What kind of cooperation do you receive from the federal government?

I would say that right now, especially post-Katrina, the support we’re getting from the preparedness side, the FEMA side of Homeland Security is dramatically improved. Very proactive. They’re pinging us almost daily on our priorities, areas of interest that we may have; they’re very forthcoming and willing to share information from that level. On the
prevention side, on the law enforcement and intelligence side, the relationship with primarily the FBI is extremely positive. Again, having people with them gives us an open door to that information. The information flow from the federal government down to us is not an impediment for us. That said, the other way around seems to be a little lacking; and by that I mean their ability to take our home-grown information, collect it, synthesize it and analyze it, then give it back to us so that we can get early warning on similar trends and patterns across the country. That seems to be an area that they’re working hard to improve on, but it is not yet occurring.

**How would you characterize your level of funding, and what would you do if you had more?**

This is my pet peeve, and we’re talking about federal funding to the state and local. As far as state funding for my office, I think because we’re a new office we received a generous amount this year. Whether the state can sustain that in the out years is questionable. But as I say, we are budgeted by the state. All our positions are state-paid for. The federal money that comes down to us, however, is deficient in the sense that it keeps being reduced every year. We never know what Congress is going to appropriate. This year, for example, we received a five percent reduction. As a matter of fact, in the last three to four years the funding—federal funding to the state and locals across the country—has dropped by more than 50 percent. So it’s very difficult to plan without having an idea of what is coming next year. So in that regard we’re a little bit dismayed, and I frankly don’t understand it. The threat has not reduced. If anything it’s probably increased with the anti-American sentiment, which is global. That’s increased. So in that regard you would think that we would be, from a federal point of view, more aware of that and be providing us with additional funds to prepare. Because this is a national problem, and as a national problem it requires a national response. The state money will only pay for normal operations. But if they want us to tool-up and be more forthcoming with counterterrorism initiatives at the state and local level, like in training police officers to be more aware and sensitive and to counterterrorism methods, that’s a threat that is not a home-grown threat. That’s a threat that is driven my national policy and it should be addressed through national funding. So to see the money being reduced, it’s very difficult to plan, and to tell the state and locals to act accordingly, because as I say, it’s not like they weren’t busy before all of this started.

**Do you find that federal “all-hazards” funding is flexible enough, or is it terrorism-specific?**

Well the prime money that comes to us is not all-hazards. It’s counterterrorism money. It’s still caveat’ed that way to buffer up critical infrastructure and to support a counterterrorism agenda. The all-hazards approach, you would have to join federal assistance to fire, which comes through a different funnel, and also FEMA grants, which come through a different funnel. But the spigot that we oversee from this office is the counterterrorism money, which is the state grant money, and the (Urban Area Security Initiative) money.
What is the state doing to protect critical infrastructure, in particular chemical and industrial sites?

Well in New Jersey we have some of the strictest laws when it comes to the protection of critical infrastructure, especially chemicals. And through a process of working with the private sector in the last five years, they have contributed more than $100 million of their own money to buffer-up some of these critical infrastructures where they have found deficiencies. So in that regard they have been very forthcoming here, and they deserve credit for that. As far as other initiatives to increase the buffer zone protection of the critical infrastructures, we’ve pushed through a process called the Infrastructure Advisory Committee, and that’s a group of private sector representatives from each sector. It’s a group that I chair, along with (Governor Jon Corzine), to solicit their input in support of a variety of initiatives, not the least of which is the idea of shoring up rail security, which is a sector that frankly is considered here more important than petroleum and chemical. Mass transit security, especially rail, is probably our number one risk here when it comes to counterterrorism. And so, in that regard, we’re investing a lot of that critical infrastructure money in that arena.

Has the state conducted any drills or simulations? What did officials learn?

We’ve had several drills, mainly on hurricanes at the beginning of the hurricane season, and we’ve had several on pandemics. Those are two mega-disasters. They key points that have come out of those drills are the fact that frankly we are not totally prepared for a mega-disaster. We can plan, we have ideas on how to improve weak areas such as identifying special-needs people ahead of time so that we know how to respond during one of these mega-disasters. We need to work more closely with the private sector. That’s popped up at every one of these exercises. The private sector in New Jersey controls 85 percent of the infrastructure. It does not make sense to exclude them from these exercises. That’s another issue that was glaring. And of course the lack of resources. That said, during the events that we have had that required state emergencies—we’ve only had one during my tenure here, that was the floods and the closure of government here at the end of our fiscal year—those required a statewide response. And during those times the communication and the response from the office of emergency management was exemplary. They were right there, there was no loss of life, there was a quick response from FEMA, and so in that regard, at least on those drills—I call them drills—both FEMA and OEM get very high marks.

What are your goals for the coming year?

I would say as far as goals, we need to pick two or three items that we can focus on and complete in the short run. One of which is to shore up interoperability. There are still spots within the state that do not communicate with each other; the emergency response community does not communicate with one another well, or well enough, and we need to invest in shoring up that deficiency. Other areas I mentioned before: mass transit—it’s imperative that we get public attention to that issue. We need public understanding when we start trying to improve security in that area because by definition we can’t impede
mass transit, we have to keep things moving. At the same time it's a very vulnerable sector. Communication with the public: we’ve made that a priority for us this year; we’re rolling out a two-on-one call hotline that the public can call in and receive information during any emergency. We think that will help improve our ability to communicate with the public in that regard, and those would be the most immediate things. I would include one more because we are a new office, and that is name recognition. We need to get out there and make sure the public knows that we are here so we do receive tips and leads; their input. Those would be short-term objectives. In the longer term it's unifying the entire emergency response community. That’s a big effort because I don’t know if you’re aware of this, but in New Jersey 80 to 85 percent of our fire service is volunteer, and probably the same percentage of our emergency medial services are volunteer. We have a serious retention and recruiting problem with these volunteers, and unifying them or having them play a more significant role with OEM so that it isn’t just the state police that responds to this; coordinating that effort over a long period of time so that it’s seamless, is a longer-term goal because we do have home rule here, so it has a lot of moving parts to it.