

Tapping State Defense Forces to Decrease Defense Spending
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State defense forces may well hold the key for states looking to maintain high levels of emergency response preparedness without bloating their budget. Twenty-two states currently have volunteer state guard units. These units, usually referred to as state defense forces (SDFs), offer a vital, low-cost (and sometimes free) force-multiplier for the National Guard and homeland security resources.

While SDFs might not seem like a vital need in states with a low risk of natural disasters or terror attacks, several states that are at high risk for catastrophes have yet to create a modern state defense force. And there are other states, still, that do have SDFs but do not quite leverage them to their full potential.

With state and federal budgets shrinking, states can no longer afford to place establishment and use of their SDF on the sidelines. Four national security analysts, including two retired SDF officers, recently explored this dilemma and sought out to explain how SDFs work, and why they are invaluable to so many states—and to the country.

The findings of Jessica Zuckerman, Colonel Martin Hershkowitz, Brigadier General Frederic N. Smalkin and James Jay Carafano, Ph.D., are worth a read, but their basic point is this:

“With the Cold War over, the nation and the states face different threats. Rather than preparing to fight Communism, the United States is now faced with an entirely different threat, that of radical Islamists who use terror as a weapon. This threat, coupled with the ever-present risk of natural disasters, has created an increased need among the states to strengthen and augment their homeland security capabilities. With the recent high mobilization rates among the nation’s National Guard forces, both as units and as individuals, due to the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, forward-thinking governors and TAGs have begun looking to their SDFs as force multipliers, providing key elements of all-hazards homeland security for their states.”

Such is the case here in Georgia, where the Georgia State Defense Force not only augments the National Guard in scenarios ranging from search and rescue missions, to pre-mobilization training, to MEDEVAC training exercises, to honor guards and other ceremonial honors, to biohazard emergency response training – but also provides free, in-house training and certification on mission-essential tasks like CPR, first aid, and rappelling. The GSDF also augments the Georgia Guard’s public affairs and JAG operations, again, at virtually no cost to the state.

The force has a core of former service veterans and is staffed entirely of volunteers who offer their own personal time on their own personal dime to serve as a force multiplier for their National Guard and community.

These SDF members aren't just more "boots on the ground" – though that alone is valuable enough – they're also volunteers who, in many cases, offer skill sets worth hundreds of dollars per hour to augment the Georgia National Guard's regular operations.

Indeed, most SDFs have medical units, engineering units, JAG units, communications units, search and rescue units (which are National Association for Search and Rescue (NASAR) and/or Community Emergency Response Team (CERT) qualified), and even a chaplaincy – all of which are designed to nest within a domestic National Guard operation or training exercise as a force multiplier.

By way of example, the Georgia Army National Guard's Col. Thomas Carden, Commander of the 560th Battlefield Surveillance Brigade, estimates that the GSDF providing volunteer role-players for his pre-mobilization training facilities saves him approximately a half-million dollars per year in costs he would otherwise have to pay contractors to provide the same service.

Suffice it to say, in any instance where a state or the National Guard might consider contracting a civilian organization to provide a for-pay defense service, it should instead first consider if a state defense force can provide the same service at no cost.

What's more, unlike other federal forces, SDFs are continually resident within their respective states and can be called up by the adjutant general on behalf of the governor quickly and easily in times of need. SDFs are also exempt from the restrictions of the Posse Comitatus Act, which prohibits troops in federal service under Title 10 from engaging in domestic law enforcement activities – though that is rarely an obstacle for National Guard forces, and rightfully so. As the commander of a state's military department, the adjutant general also directs – or works with his/her FEMA partner to direct – state emergency response. Through the adjutant general and the state's joint staff, an SDF can easily coordinate with other key components of the state emergency response.

In recent years, SDFs have proven their value as vital force providers to homeland security and emergency responses. After 9/11, for instance, the New York State Guard, the New York Naval Militia, and the New Jersey Naval Militia were activated to assist in response, recovery, and critical infrastructure security. An estimated 2,274 SDF personnel participated in recovery efforts after Hurricane Katrina. SDFs have also provided critical infrastructure protection since 9/11.

The point is a simple one: In a day and age where state governments are looking every which way to find budget savings, why not look at doing more with state defense forces? The formula works here in Georgia, allowing the Georgia Department of Defense to do more for less – and you can bet that in each state, including Georgia, there are a host of additional people who would love to volunteer their time to directly support their community, their state, and their National Guard in the tradition of this nation's militia.