

SENATE PLANS DISASTER DRILL

By Mark Preston

Roll Call

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Senate officials are scouting locations 1,000 miles outside of Washington, D.C., in an effort to identify facilities that could house the body if a catastrophic event forced lawmakers to flee the nation's capital.

Trying to find a secure area outside of Washington for the Senate to conduct business is part of an effort by the Sergeant-at-Arms and the Secretary of the Senate to ensure the chamber's continuity of operations during a national crisis.

"We are not prepared to say at this time [that] we have a location in mid-America, but we are actively seeking to identify a place where we could go that could accommodate us depending upon the threat," Sergeant-at-Arms Alfonso Lenhardt said in an interview. "It is the same process that is underway in the executive branch as well as the judicial branch."

Lenhardt also said that Senate officials have identified locations on Capitol Hill and in the capital region where operations could be relocated should an event as minor as a water main break or as major as a full-blown attack force them to vacate the chamber.

"What we are looking at is what we call concentric circles of security, depending upon the level of threat. You either say we stay here on the Capitol complex or we move away depending on the threat," he said.

Lenhardt would not disclose the location of the sites, but did produce a map of the United States showing ovals of increasing size originating in Washington - as far as halfway across the country - to show the scope of their search for a reliably secure location.

During the Cold War, a massive bunker capable of housing both the Senate and House was built at the Greenbrier resort in White Sulphur Springs, W.Va., to be used if the country came under a nuclear attack. Even though the Cold War is over, nuclear weapons remain a threat, as are biological and chemical agents.

If Senators are forced to vacate the Capitol, Secretary of the Senate Jeri Thomson said that no legislation is needed to reconstitute at another location.

"If the Sergeant-at-Arms says we need to vacate, we vacate," she said. Lenhardt said he would offer advice but defer such a decision to the Senate leadership.

To test the Senate's ability to quickly pack up and move to another location, officials plan an evacuation exercise this summer to see how smoothly Sergeant-at-Arms and Secretary of the Senate offices can move the Senate floor operations to one of the facilities in the city. The exercise will likely be conducted at a time when Senators are not engaged in legislative business and would focus more on relocating operations rather than lawmakers.

"We are going to be doing something this summer in terms of rehearsing our plans to move the Secretary of the Senate and the Sergeant-at-Arms," Lenhardt said. "We are going to go through a tabletop exercise that will put us through a simulation to move the chamber."

"His insistence upon drills and on exercises including participation of the Senators is absolutely critical," said Sen. Bill Frist (R-Tenn.), a heart surgeon who worked closely with Senate officials during the anthrax contamination last fall.

While the Senate and the House are working on separate continuity-of-operations plans, Lenhardt said the two legislative bodies are

working "in concert" to be able to reconstitute Congress at another location if necessary.

"We are working with them in terms of where we might go," Lenhardt said. "The coordination has been very good up to this point."

The House is scheduled to convene a bipartisan meeting today to discuss how to move forward if scores of Members are killed during an attack. Rep. Brian Baird (D-Wash.) has suggested that governors, who can appoint Senators in the event of a vacancy, also be charged with making temporary appointments if a catastrophe wiped out at least 25 percent of the House. Others have proposed allowing a Member to predetermine their successor. There are currently no provisions for the appointment of House Members under any circumstances.

While the individual branches of government put their own continuity-of-operations plans into place, tension between the legislative and executive branches appears to have eased since it was reported earlier this year that the White House had created a shadow government that did not take Congress into account.

"In terms of whether or not we are factoring them into our plans for coordination for ensuring that we have the necessary communications and the ability to talk with them and exchange information, the answer is yes," Lenhardt said. "Those discussions are taking place."

At separate meetings Tuesday, Lenhardt briefed Democratic and Republican Senators about the status of the chamber's continuity plan.

"The Sergeant-at-Arms and I feel very confident what they have now put in the plan is meritorious, and with additional consideration of options we are going to be in a better position down the road," Senate

Majority Leader Thomas Daschle (D-S.D.) said after the Democratic meeting.

To notify Senators in the event of an emergency, Lenhardt said that Blackberry e-mail devices have been issued and the Whip pagers that currently alert Senators of impending votes are being updated and tied into the Capitol Police notification system.

While Lenhardt is responsible for outfitting the chamber and providing the security for Senators, it is Thomson's duty to ensure that the tools are available to Senators so that they can continue to pass legislation. For example, the Senate parliamentarian's office and floor staffers have "fly-away" kits to help make sure the legislative process is not interrupted.

"Whatever location we end up in we want to be able to set up shop correctly and then be able to conduct a session of the Senate," she said.

The kits include everything from a copy of the Senate's rules and precedents to the forms needed when amendments are introduced. The planning is so precise that door keepers have even been instructed to grab the gavel should the Senate need to evacuate.

In the event of a national emergency, only staffers and lawmakers flagged as critical to the legislative process would travel to the new location. Thomson said individual offices have been instructed to create their own continuity plans.

"We need to be practical about what the continuity of government means, and that is to pass laws and pass legislation," she said.

Thomson did note that her office is working with key committees such as Appropriations, Armed Services, Foreign Relations and Intelligence to determine their needs should an evacuation take place.

"We are working with the appropriate committees that are critical to the process in a dire circumstance," she said. "We have got to have them there."

In addition, the media is considered a critical element of the continuity-of-operations plan and would be part of any move by the Senate to reconstitute at another site, Thomson said.

"The press has got to be there because the American people need to know that their government is functioning," she said.

Lenhardt said it is likely the Senate will have its own mobile recording studio in the future with cameras and satellite dishes to provide the feed of Senate floor proceedings to C-SPAN and the networks at any location.

"Our plan is to televise the activities in the Senate," he said.

Efforts to create a plan to reconstitute Congress in the event of a catastrophic event did not begin in the wake of the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks. Two years earlier, the joint bipartisan leadership directed the Capitol Police Board to set in motion a plan to make sure Congress was able to operate from another location. This foresight is credited with helping to ease the relocation of 50 Senate offices, 15 committees and several support offices when the Hart Senate Office Building was closed for three months to remove anthrax spores released from a letter opened Oct. 15 in Daschle's office.

"The reason all of that worked is because our continuity-of-operation plans were done," Thomson said.

But not all aspects of the plan were put into action, and there was never any consideration of the idea that an airplane might be used as a guided missile. Following the Sept. 11 attacks, Lenhardt formed a task force comprised of Congressional and Intelligence officials to

make a threat assessment of the Capitol.

"Basically it was a group of very smart people who understood contingency planning and what was necessary in that threat environment," said Lenhardt, who added that the review continues to this day.

"If you don't continually assess, re-evaluate, rehearse and then discover where the weaknesses are and develop ways of correcting them, then your plan isn't worth the paper it is written on," he said.

Congressional officials are also working with the city to identify better ways to secure Constitution and Independence avenues beyond the truck restriction that is already in place.

"In addition to that we are looking at height and weight platforms whereby you can identify whether a truck is coming your way based upon the height and weight of a vehicle," Lenhardt said. "We are also looking at cameras that give us a better standoff so we can identify a potential threat."

In the past nine months, several security changes have already taken place on Capitol Hill based upon the task force's recommendations. Double doors with "panic bars" have replaced the revolving door that opened onto the Senate steps; a wide pathway was cut in the fence behind Hart to allow evacuating staffers to safely distance themselves from the building; and evacuation alarms throughout the Capitol and office buildings have been repaired.

In the future, cylindrical concrete barriers will slowly be replaced by more aesthetically pleasing posts similar to those outside of the Russell Senate Office Building on the corner of Constitution and Delaware avenues.

"All of this is the balance between security and free and open access," Lenhardt said, adding

that security measures are driven by the fact that the Capitol "is the most identifiable complex in the country."