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Terror may send exodus west

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DAVIS, W.Va. -- Suburban Washington residents likely would jump in their cars and drive through the Eastern Panhandle, Maryland and Virginia in the event of a terror attack, a West Virginia University survey shows.

West Virginia officials say the survey underscores the need for a regional plan to handle an exodus of 6 million or 7 million people.

Many of them would leave the region, either heading north, south or straight through the panhandle, said assistant professor Brian Gerber, who worked on the survey.

He presented the results yesterday to more than 100 public-safety officials gathered for a regional evacuation conference. The event is considered a first step toward creating a regional evacuation plan.

The survey of 800 people in West Virginia, Virginia and Maryland also shows that many think an attack is likely, Mr. Gerber said.

"This is a very real issue that should be addressed," he said. "There's going to be some sort of large-scale self-evacuation."

Gov. Joe Manchin III said in a brief press conference that the state is prepared to handle some evacuees but not hundreds of thousands or millions.

Doing so requires just the sort of regional cooperation envisioned by conference planners, he said.

"Seven states and the District of Columbia are working together," Mr. Manchin said. "That's what we need to do."

West Virginia has taken what Mr. Manchin considers the step of figuring out what it can and can't do. The state has looked at how to house and care for people who are suffering, he said, including reviews of every public building, including schools.

Although Mr. Manchin considers the state prepared, he said there's more to be done. "We can still be better prepared."

Although people say they would flee across the country, the survey shows that about one-quarter would head south along the East Coast, and another quarter would head west, presumably through West Virginia's Eastern Panhandle, clogging roads and straining services.


During a speech, Mr. Manchin said dealing with the Sago Mine disaster in January and trying to help victims of Hurricane Katrina taught him a couple of lessons.

First, states must take charge whenever possible. And second, the nation is sorely lacking

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plans for states to help one another.

"The state of West Virginia, we're going to take that [responsibility], we're going to call the shot," he said.

And the state is going to work with its neighbors, he said.

"By you being here today, that's the beginning."

Besides West Virginia, officials from the District, Maryland, Delaware, Ohio, Kentucky, Pennsylvania and Virginia are attending the conference.

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