



Security consultants wonder if Olympic planners have thought of everything

By RICH VOSEPKA, Associated Press Writer
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The Winter Games are as safe as they can get. Homeland Security Director Tom Ridge, U.S. Attorney General John Ashcroft and a platoon of other federal officials have been unanimous in their confidence.

But what if they're wrong?

"Sometimes, the things that happen aren't the things you plan for," said John Fannin, President and CEO of SafePlace Corporation and private-sector risk management specialist. "They must begin with the assumption of some failure."

A plan that focuses too much on prevention, and not enough on what to do if something "slips through the cracks" can turn into a disaster, he said.

"There's no magic solution that provides 100 percent protection - unless you just don't allow people to congregate."

People will indeed congregate for the games, an estimated 70,000 visitors per day.

Security planners say their preparations are wide and deep. They not only anticipate threats with a formidable intelligence operation, they also know how to minimize the consequences of an unexpected catastrophe using the full resources of the federal government.

More than 60 different agencies are involved in Olympic security, including city police and fire departments, statewide agencies such as the Department of Health, and federal heavy hitters such as the FBI and Secret Service.

A secure Winter Games depends upon those varied groups being unified, said Dave Thompson, a facilities security expert whose firm is helping rebuild the Pentagon, damaged in the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks.

The mesh in the security net loosens when agencies aren't talking to one another and cooperating, he said. This is another area where top law enforcement officers have been unanimous:

The Olympic security effort is an unprecedented model of harmony.

"There's no room for ego," said Robert Flowers, commander of the Utah Olympic Public Safety Command, the umbrella agency for the games' security players.

Fannin, whose company provides independent safety and security assessments of hotels and other businesses, said security planners shouldn't ignore local experts.

"I can't overemphasize how important it is. You need to include the local agencies. They need to be intimately involved," he said.

This concept is at the heart of the Olympic security plan. At each of the games venues, spread across 900 square miles, it is the local police, fire and emergency workers who are in charge of day-to-day operations.

Federal resources, including the military and Federal Emergency Management Agency, are on call if big trouble unfolds.

While the venues themselves may be secure, both Fannin and Thompson raised questions about the places in between, where large numbers of people will be gathering - without the intense security focus of the venues.

Flowers has acknowledged security officers can't watch every square inch of sidewalk and highway. But Salt Lake City Police Department officials say they aim to keep their response times as quick as usual during the Feb. 8-24 games.

On the Net:

Utah Olympic Public Safety Command: <http://www.uopsc.org>

SafePlace Corporation: <http://www.safeplace.com>