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Don't Panic, Prepare

Preparing Southern California for the possibility of terrorist retaliation against a war in Iraq is a high-wire act. On one side lie denial and complacency. On the other lies the kind of panic that in Israel caused the suffocation of three family members who had taped up their bedroom against the threat of poison gas.

It's not surprising to find local leaders dancing a bit to keep their balance, as Los Angeles Mayor James K. Hahn did last week when Police Chief William J. Bratton complained that the city's cops and firefighters lacked the equipment and training to deal with biological and chemical attacks. In the language of political consultants, Bratton went off message, compelling Hahn to reassure residents that the city has plans in place to respond to an attack. By Monday they, along with Sheriff Lee Baca, were back in harmony, detailing plans for emergency centers and increased security.

Sure, residents want to know the city has a plan, but they also want police officers and firefighters charged with carrying it out to be well protected. The mayor found a balance Monday when he called for the city to spend \$5.9 million on masks, protective suits, radiation detectors and other equipment. The City Council should agree without fussing.

At home, most Southern Californians already have the earthquake drill, which also applies to terrorism, down pat. Check emergency supplies of water and food. Keep a battery-operated radio handy. Make sure that family members know how to contact each other.

And one new thing: Lobby Congress and the Bush administration to live up to promises to help hard-pressed state and local governments pay for homeland security equipment and training.

Newly formed neighborhood councils would seem to be ideal for setting up local plans and learning about the civilian disaster training offered by the Los Angeles Fire Department. The councils also could be forums for talking about what not to do. Panicky mass attempts to get out of the city, for example, could lead to accidents and gridlock, blocking emergency workers. Even in worst-case chemical, biological or radioactive strikes, the affected area would be limited, but fleeing residents could drive through or downwind of such an area.

Southern California avoided the duct-tape-buying frenzy that hit Washington and New York a few weeks ago. Level-headed thinking, in families and governments, will help

sort real danger from hype, fright and rumor even in the heightened watchfulness of the first days of war.