

STATE DEFENSE FORCES & DISASTER PREPAREDNESS:

Enhancing State Emergency Capacity



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MANAGING EDITORS:

Jonathan Williams

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Christian Whittle

Director of Publications
American Legislative Exchange Council

AUTHOR:

Zachary Federico

Director
Veterans and Military Affairs Task Force
American Legislative Exchange Council

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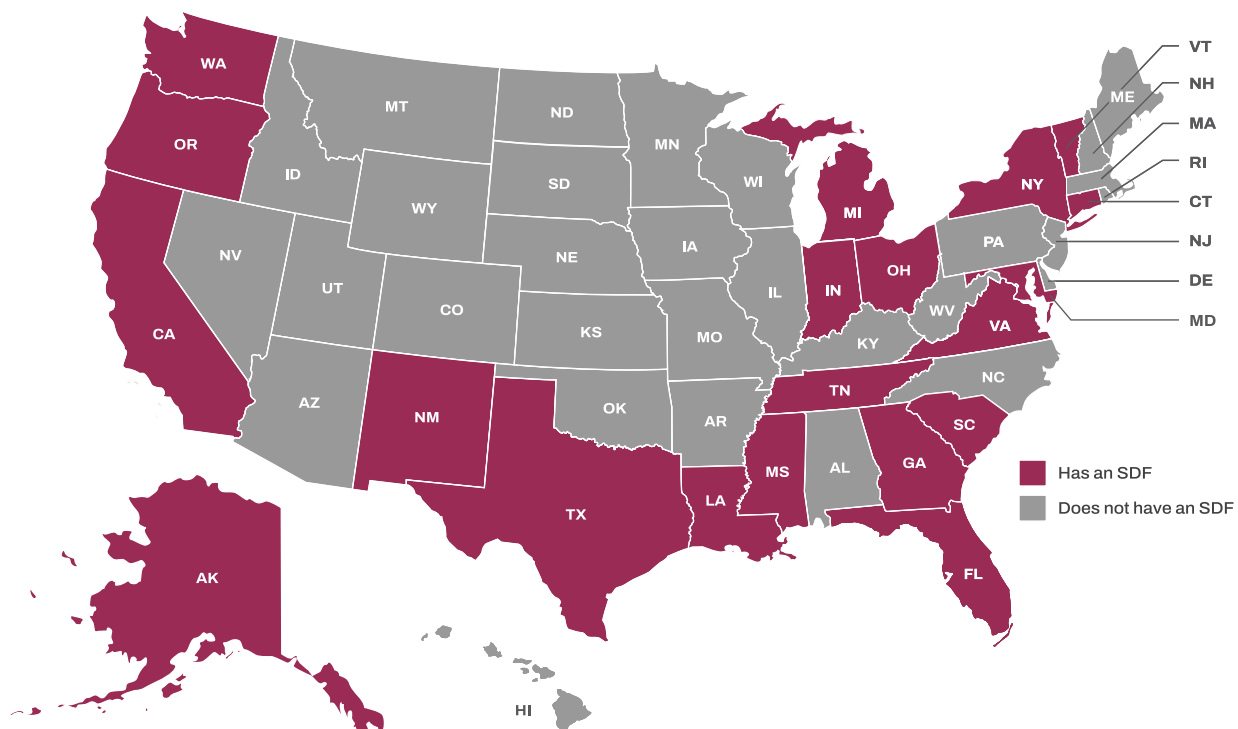
CONTACT INFORMATION

American Legislative Exchange Council

2733 Crystal Drive, Suite 1000
Arlington, VA 22202
Tel: (703) 373 0933

www.alec.org

Because SDF members are generally unpaid unless activated for state emergencies, they provide the state with vital manpower for a fraction of the cost associated with National Guard units. Further, they are always available to states since they cannot be deployed by the federal government. By establishing and maintaining these state militias, state governments can significantly bolster their disaster preparedness and reduce their reliance on the federal government in times of crisis.



To help states strengthen their resilience, this publication will explain what SDFs are, their historical evolution, and their modern applications.

WHAT ARE STATE DEFENSE FORCES (SDFs)?

SDFs are the modern evolution of American volunteer military forces, which have existed since before the Revolutionary War.³ These militias are created by states, organized by governors, and tailored for state-specific needs. Depending on the state, the militia may be referred to as State Defense Forces, State Guards, or Home Guards. Unlike the National Guard, the size, mission, and availability of an SDF are entirely under the state's control. As a result, SDFs are uniquely equipped to fill gaps in state emergency response plans.

Since they are not required to train for a combat role, SDFs are typically focused exclusively on homeland security and emergency management.⁴ Many have specialized expertise in medical, religious, and legal fields; can conduct robust search and rescue missions after natural disasters or attacks using weapons of mass destruction; and possess naval and air capabilities.⁵ Additionally, the State Guard Association of the United States (SGAUS) offers national training to SDF members, equipping them to coordinate closely with federal agencies during emergencies.⁶

As volunteer organizations, SDFs are remarkably cost-efficient. Most states do not pay their SDFs for drill attendance or training, and when they are called to State Active Duty, most SDFs are paid at a lower rate than their federal counterparts in the National Guard.⁷ In Virginia, Texas, and California, for example, the state's SDF is allocated less than 1% of the state's defense preparedness budget annually.

The maintenance costs for SDFs are typically outweighed by their service to the state. For example, the Georgia SDF volunteers in 2002 provided over 1,797 days of operational support, filling roles that would have otherwise required National Guard or State Police resources, saving the state an estimated \$1.5 million in operating costs.⁸

THE INCREASING RELEVANCE OF STATE DEFENSE FORCES

SDFs are uniquely equipped to fill the gaps left by the National Guard's evolving mission. The Total Force Doctrine, which was created in the 1970s, integrated the active-duty forces, Reserves, and National Guard into one homogeneous force.⁹ The policy evolved in 2012 to the Army Total Force Policy (ATFP) which partially streamlined the process for deploying the Reserves and National Guard.¹⁰ While the new policies strengthened the federal government's national security mission, they left states with a void as the Guard's training shifted toward federal priorities over state missions and its deployment tempo increased.¹¹ As a result, states are often required to rely on federal agencies and other states for emergency response when their National Guard is deployed.

Additionally, the ATFP has reinforced the National Guard's focus on federal priorities for force allocation. Since the National Guard is primarily funded by the federal government, Congress and the National Guard Bureau determine how many guardsmen each state can recruit based exclusively on federal needs. For example, Florida has been allocated just over 12,000 guardsmen since 1958,¹² despite frequent natural disasters and a population that has more than quadrupled. While Florida's needs have increased, the federal government's needs for the Florida National Guard have not, preventing the Sunshine State from expanding its ranks. This led Gov. Ron DeSantis to reestablish the Florida State Guard in 2022 to bolster the state's manpower during emergencies.

Even in states with a large National Guard force allocation, deployments can leave the state shorthanded in emergencies as a significant portion of a state's police, firefighters, and emergency response personnel also serve as members of the National Guard.¹³

Further, the ATFP essentially guarantees that in the case of a major conflict, the majority or totality of National Guard units would be federalized, leaving a major internal security gap for states.¹⁴ This has led the Department of War and the National Guard Bureau to endorse states establishing SDFs to fill the gap left by National Guard mobilizations.¹⁵ Unlike the National Guard, SDFs cannot be mobilized by the federal government and are always available to serve their state when needed.

HISTORY OF STATE DEFENSE FORCES

The Founding Fathers incorporated the states' governorship over the militia, separate from the federal government's control of the Army, in Article 1, Section 8 of the Constitution:

*To provide for organizing, arming, and disciplining, the Militia, and for governing such Part of them as may be employed in the Service of the United States, reserving to the States respectively, the Appointment of the Officers, and the Authority of training the Militia according to the discipline prescribed by Congress;*¹⁶

In the clause prior, the Constitution provided the federal government with the power “for calling forth the Militia to execute the Laws of the Union, suppress Insurrections and repel Invasions.”¹⁷ Together, these clauses established the dual federal-state jurisdiction over the state militias.

In 1792, Congress passed the Uniform Militia Act, which governed the militia system until the early twentieth century. The law created a universal service obligation and required all able-bodied white men between the ages of 18 and 45 to register for militia duty.¹⁸ Since the system did not impose penalties for noncompliance, states largely neglected to enforce service, and the system functioned poorly until it was overhauled by the Dick Act of 1903.¹⁹ This act, which was expanded in 1908, formally organized the National Guard as the nation’s organized militia and authorized the President to federalize the Guard during wars or emergencies.²⁰

In 1916, President Wilson exercised this power by federalizing the National Guard for service along the southern border during the Mexican Punitive Expedition, removing them from state control.²¹ Since section 10 of the Constitution prevented the states from keeping “troops, or ships of war in times of peace,” many states were left without a local militia force during the conflict.²²

WORLD WAR I

This situation was repeated at the onset of World War I when the federal government mobilized the entire National Guard and left the states largely without military forces. This led the states to call for new state militias to fill the void, and Congress responded with the Home Defense Act of 1917, which authorized states to create military units when the National Guard was removed from their control.²³

As new state military organizations with different missions, capabilities, and levels of support, the World War I SDFs varied considerably from state to state. Nearly every state took measures to expand its police forces. Some established state-controlled military units, while others formed National Guard reserve components. A few even permitted localities to organize independent military forces without state oversight.²⁴ By December 1917, 42 states had created some form of SDF tailored to their specific needs, with a total aggregate strength of nearly 100,000 men.²⁵ These SDFs served their internal security mission during the war, but were mostly disbanded once it ended.

HOME DEFENSE FORCES IN WORLD WAR I			
STATE	NAME	STATE	NAME
Alabama	N/A	Nebraska	Home Guard
Arizona	Loyalty League	Nevada	N/A
Arkansas	Home Guard	New Hampshire	State Guard
California	State Defense Guard	New Jersey	State Militia and State Reserve Militia
Colorado	State Service	New Mexico	Home Guard
Connecticut	Home Guard	New York	New York Guard
Delaware	Organized Militia	North Carolina	Reserve Militia
Florida	**34 towns formed local militias**	North Dakota	N/A
Georgia	State Guard	Ohio	Home Guard
Idaho	Home Guard	Oklahoma	Home Guard
Illinois	Reserve Militia and Volunteer Training Units	Oregon	Oregon Guard
Indiana	Indiana Guard Reserve	Pennsylvania	Reserve Militia
Iowa	N/A	Rhode Island	State Guard
Kansas	State Guard	South Carolina	State Reserve Militia
Kentucky	State Guard	South Dakota	Home Guard
Louisiana	Home Guard	Tennessee	NG Reserve
Maine	Home Guard	Texas	Rangers

Maryland	State Guard	Utah	N/A
Massachusetts	State Guard	Vermont	Volunteer Militia
Michigan	Home Guard	Virginia	Virginia Volunteers
Minnesota	Home Guard	Washington	State Guard
Mississippi	Home Guard	West Virginia	Militia Reserves
Missouri	Home Guard	Wisconsin	State Guard
Montana	N/A	Wyoming	Home Guard

Source: Tulenko et al., “US Home Defense Force Study”

WORLD WAR II

While World War I generated little concern for domestic security, the onset of World War II presented far greater challenges as the Axis powers were anticipated to conduct espionage, sabotage, and foment civil unrest on a much broader scale.²⁶ This led every state except for Arizona, Montana, and Nevada to establish SDFs.²⁷ They generally pursued four missions: perform the National Guard’s peacetime duties, guard vital infrastructure, train to repel invasions, and ensure the nation’s internal security.²⁸ In every state, the SDF was commanded by the state’s Adjutant General under the governor’s authority as commander-in-chief.²⁹ While they were activated frequently to full-time duty during the war’s early days, the fear of invasion and sabotage receded during 1942, and most SDF units were moved back to a reserve status.

SUMMARY OF STATE GUARD PERSONNEL, OCTOBER 31, 1941

STATE AND UNITS	AUTHORIZED	MUSTERED
Connecticut State Guard	4,134	2,954
Maine State Guard	1,264	1,291
Massachusetts State Guard	9,210	7,679
New Hampshire State Guard	2,187	590
Rhode Island State Guard	1,072	1,041
Vermont State Guard	1,618	1,253
Delaware State Guard	371	371
New Jersey State Guard	2,110	1,657
New York Guard	17,114	12,759
Maryland State Guard	3,920	2,943
Pennsylvania Reserve Defense Corps	2,149	1,946
Virginia Protective Force	3,077	2,830
Alabama State Guard	3,047	1,105
Florida Defense Force	2,430	2,234
Georgia State Defense Force	6,004	5,242
Mississippi State Guard	1,051	450
North Carolina State Guard	2,145	1,976
South Carolina Defense Force	6,553	5,336
Tennessee State Guard	4,000	2,248
Indiana State Guard	2,517	1,952

Kentucky Active Militia	2,500	1,744
Ohio State Guard	4,800	2,004
Illinois Reserve Militia	5,999	5,149
Michigan State Troops	3,674	3,027
Wisconsin State Guard	2,389	2,190
Kansas State Guard	1,442	1,399
Minnesota Defense Force	4,293	3,755
Missouri State Guard	3,324	2,834
Nebraska State Guard	328	*
Wyoming State Guard	474	462
Colorado Defense Force	280	168
New Mexico State Guard	1,048	885
Texas Defense Guard	16,200	14,142
California State Guard	15,796	12,151
Utah State Guard	400	*
Washington State Guard	2,060	998
TOTAL	140,980	108,765

* Recruiting: Arms and equipment under procurement

Source: 1941 Annual Report of the Chief of the National Guard Bureau

The relationship between the federal military forces and the SDFs was unclear throughout the war. The federal government eventually issued a directive on this topic, stating that any SDF involvement in federal operations would be governed by mutual agreement to preserve state sovereignty.³⁰ The primary responsibility given to SDFs in case of invasion would be to harass and slow the enemy's progress until federal troops arrived. As the war developed and the threat of invasion became irrelevant, the War Department in 1944 decided to send virtually all remaining federal troops to Europe and task the SDFs with primary responsibility for internal security.³¹

STATUS OF STATE GUARDS, 30 JUNE 1946

STATE AND UNITS	AUTHORIZED		MUSTERED	
	State Guard	State Guard Reserve	State Guard	State Guard Reserve
Alabama State Guard	3,152	-	2,337	-
Alaska Territorial Guard	6,300	-	3,968	-
Arkansas State Guard	1,500	-	1,128	-
California State Guard	Unlimited	-	5,512	-
Colorado State Guard	1,227	-	398	-
Connecticut State Guard	4,449	-	2,962	-
Delaware State Guard	831	-	453	-
Florida State Guard	2,533	-	1,308	-
Georgia State Guard	9,700	-	1,934	1,290

Hawaii Territorial Guard	600	As necessary	46	663
Idaho State Guard	736	-	594	-
Illinois Reserve Militia	10,000	-	4,228	-
Indiana State Guard	2,792	721	2,058	-
Iowa State Guard	2,298	68	1,723	68
Kansas State Guard	1,576	-	1,237	-
Kentucky Active Militia	2,000	-	1,986	-
Louisiana State Guard	1,770	-	932	-
Maine State Guard	2,085	Unlimited	1,501	160
Maryland State Guard	3,805	-	1,955	-
Massachusetts State Guard	10,792	-	7,799	-
Michigan State Troops	6,983	3,468	5,011	700
Minnesota State Guard	4,943	-	3,066	-
Mississippi State Guard	2,310	-	1,582	-
Missouri State Guard	5,100	-	2,997	-
Nebraska State Guard	1,201	-	521	-
New Hampshire State Guard	1,362	-	746	-
New Jersey State Guard	3,706	-	1,933	-
New Mexico State Guard	1,031	-	589	-
New York Guard	29,702	-	17,327	-
North Carolina State Guard	2,402	-	1,678	-
North Dakota State Guard	711	-	117	-
Ohio State Guard	4,800	-	3,833	-
Oregon State Guard	2,500	Unlimited	2,414	3,256
Pennsylvania State Guard	2,543	4,221	1,871	4,408
Puerto Rico Guard	2,475	-	1,647	-
Rhode Island State Guard	1,266	-	747	-
South Carolina State Guard	6,716	-	3,883	-
South Dakota State Guard	358	-	154	-
Tennessee State Guard	11,910	-	3,658	-
Texas State Guard	23,075	-	8,737	-
Utah State Guard	666	-	400	-
Vermont State Guard	1,685	93	614	56
Virginia State Guard	4,069	-	2,225	-
Washington State Guard	2,485	-	2,136	-
West Virginia State Guard	1,539	-	1,261	-
Wisconsin State Guard	2,829	44	1,975	-
Wyoming State Guard	516	-	361	-
TOTAL	197,029	8,615	115,542	10,601

Source: 1946 Annual Report of the Chief of the National Guard Bureau

After the war ended, the SDFs began a slow and uneven process of deactivation. In 1947, Congress amended the National Defense Act to once again prohibit states from organizing military forces other than the National Guard. Simultaneously, the act increased the need for SDFs by further integrating the National Guard into the active-duty mission.³² This tension between the National Guard's federal mission and states' needs would remain unaddressed until the Korean War.

KOREAN WAR AND COLD WAR

The North Korean invasion of South Korea in 1948 once again plunged the United States into conflict. States responded by creating plans for reestablishing their SDFs but were prohibited from executing them since the federal war plan only called for a partial National Guard mobilization. In 1950 and 1951, the federal government laid the legislative and administrative groundwork for organizing state defense forces on a national scale. However, despite requests from several states, it chose not to move forward.³³

Instead, Congress chose to reauthorize SDFs for two years by reverting the relevant sections of the National Defense Act to the World War II language with a sunset provision. This allowed states to begin reorganizing their forces, but most states hesitated to progress beyond the planning stages until federal statutes were clarified and the direction of the Korean War became more apparent.³⁴

Confusion around authorization and necessity prevented most states from fully reforming their SDFs before the two-year term ended in 1952.³⁵ However, the need for states to provide for internal security during National Guard federalizations was still apparent, and Congress finally amended the National Defense Act in 1956 to allow states to establish and maintain SDFs permanently.³⁶ This empowered states to operate their own military organizations independently of the federal government without fear that their authorization would be revoked. The Cold War led many states to take these steps in the 1980s, and Congress encouraged states to create SDFs by further strengthening the National Defense Act's language in 1983.³⁷

MODERN STATE DEFENSE FORCES

Having established the historical evolution of State Defense Forces and their role, it is important to examine how these organizations operate in the modern era. Much like their predecessors, contemporary SDFs vary considerably in mission, structure, and state support.

The following state spotlights highlight three different levels of investment and SDF integration into modern missions, including disaster response, emergency management, cyber security, and homeland defense. These examples demonstrate how SDFs can be a valuable resource to any state, regardless of size, budget, or disaster vulnerability.

FLORIDA STATE GUARD

Few states face natural disasters as often as Florida. For decades, hurricanes, flooding, and other emergencies have stretched the Sunshine State's emergency response systems to the limit. Yet, despite frequent disasters and a rapidly increasing population, the National Guard Bureau has declined to increase Florida's National Guard force allocation since 1958.³⁸ This has led the Florida National Guard to experience one of the nation's lowest citizen-guardsmen ratios, despite the obvious need for National Guard support.

When repeated requests for additional guardsmen continued to go unheard, Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis and the Florida Legislature decided to reestablish the Florida State Guard in 2022. Since then, the Florida State Guard has become one of the largest and most capable SDFs. In just a few years, the Florida State Guard has grown to around 1,000 members divided among four components: the Aviation Response Squadron, the Crisis Response Battalion, the Maritime Response Squadron, and the Special Missions Unit.³⁹

During Hurricanes Debby, Helene, and Milton, the Florida State Guard deployed over 600 members who partnered with state emergency response agencies to conduct over 300 search and rescue missions and 220 health and welfare checks across 43 of the state's 67 counties. During these missions, Florida's SDF distributed more than 2,000 meals and 3,600 liters of water.⁴⁰ Through these operations, the Florida State Guard quickly proved its value as a critical force multiplier in statewide disaster response.

VIRGINIA DEFENSE FORCE

The Virginia State Defense Force is a great example of an effective medium-sized SDF. The commonwealth's SDF was reestablished in 1984 following Congressional reauthorization and amendments to the Code of Virginia by the Virginia General Assembly. Today, it has about 200 members and aims to provide operations center support, interoperable communications, and cyber defense. It also provides direct assistance to the Virginia National Guard through logistics, medical, chaplain, legal, and public affairs functions.⁴¹

In February 2025, the Virginia Defense Force embedded more than 20 members with Virginia National Guard Soldiers to support emergency response operations during a winter storm. The team delivered chainsaws and protective equipment, organized food and lodging, sourced local supplies, and provided communications support to coordinate the emergency response across the Commonwealth.⁴² Throughout the crisis, the Virginia Defense Force's specialized emergency management training played a critical role in enhancing the state's response capabilities.

One of the Virginia Defense Forces' more unique aspects is its Cyber Battalion. Consisting of volunteers from across the Commonwealth, many of whom work in cyber security in their civilian capacity, the Cyber Battalion has become an essential element of the state's cyber defense. By securing emergency response communications networks, fortifying state infrastructure with state agencies, and training to counter cyber attacks, the group ensures that Virginia is prepared to win on the digital battlefield.⁴³

In August 2025, the Cyber Battalion demonstrated their role in Virginia's emergency response by joining National Guard and civilian cyber operators for a training exercise that simulated Virginia's response to a major cyber attack.⁴⁴ The exercise simulated real-world events and demonstrated the Cyber Battalion's capacity to defend the Commonwealth from these threats.

INDIANA GUARD RESERVE

With a force of roughly 70 members, the Indiana Guard Reserve demonstrates how even a small State Defense Force can deliver meaningful support to its state. All members complete Community Emergency Response Team (CERT) training through the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) and regularly sustain their proficiency through ongoing unit and joint exercises. They play a key role in augmenting the National Guard during emergencies and can fill their emergency management role during deployments. The Indiana Guard Reserve has also provided valuable support to state and local events, including security operations during the Indianapolis 500 Festival Mini-Marathon and other major races.

Beyond community engagement, the Indiana Guard Reserve plays a key role in supporting the Indiana National Guard's readiness. Members help run weapons qualification ranges to ensure National Guard Soldiers and Airmen can train safely and effectively. They also assist during large-scale exercises by serving as role-players to make scenarios more realistic, including one with the National Guard, FEMA, and the Israel Defense Force. Members also assist the National Guard with administrative tasks such as performing maintenance, inspections, and equipment inventory management that keep the National Guard mission-ready. Together, these efforts show how a small volunteer force can have an outsized impact on the state's overall preparedness.

CONCLUSION

From their origins in the colonial militia system to their modern role as state-directed emergency response organizations, State Defense Forces have consistently demonstrated their ability to fill a critical readiness gap for states. History has shown that when the National Guard is federalized, states are left without sufficient resources to protect their citizens and maintain internal security. This problem is increasingly relevant today as the National Guard becomes further integrated into the Army's Total Force Policy. Modern examples in Florida, Virginia, and Indiana demonstrate that today's SDFs can provide specialized, cost-effective capabilities that strengthen state readiness and ensure that states are prepared for crises.

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