



The Critical Role of First Responders: Sharing Lessons Learned from Past Attacks

Statement of

Chief James H. Schwartz

Arlington County Fire Department

presented to the

COMMITTEE ON HOMELAND SECURITY

U.S. House of Representatives

June 18, 2014

INTERNATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF FIRE CHIEFS
4025 FAIR RIDGE DRIVE • FAIRFAX, VA 22033-2868

Good morning, Chairman McCaul, Ranking Member Thompson, and distinguished members of the committee. I am James Schwartz, Chief of the Arlington County (Virginia) Fire Department (ACFD) and chairman of the Terrorism and Homeland Security Committee of the International Association of Fire Chiefs (IAFC). The IAFC represents the leadership of the nation's fire, rescue, and emergency medical services (EMS), including rural volunteer fire departments, metropolitan career departments and suburban combination departments. I thank the committee for this opportunity to discuss lessons learned from past incidents of terrorism.

The Response to the Incident at the Pentagon on September 11, 2001

At 9:38 a.m. on September 11, 2001, American Airlines Flight #77 crashed into the Pentagon as part of a large-scale terrorist attack upon the United States. I arrived on scene at 9:48 a.m. and assumed incident command of the response. The main focus in the early hours of the response was to control the fires resulting from the crash and provide emergency medical care for the victims at the Pentagon. Sadly, the attack on the Pentagon claimed the lives of 184 people. Overall, the response to the Pentagon incident involved resources from across the National Capital Region (NCR), the commonwealth of Virginia, and multiple federal agencies. The Arlington County Fire Department was the lead agency for unified command for 10 days and turned over primacy of command to the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) on September 21.

In the early days of the response, Chief Ed Plaughter, my predecessor, instituted a process for collecting details of the response, so that they could be analyzed to create lessons learned. This analysis was produced as an after-action report by the Titan Systems Corporation that was funded with the support of the U.S. Department of Justice's Office for Domestic Preparedness. The report included 235 recommendations and lessons learned. In addition, the 9/11 Commission also reviewed the response to the attack on the Pentagon and made recommendations based on the analysis. The findings of these reports have been discussed in articles, conferences, and Congressional hearings over the past 13 years.

Despite the unfortunate loss of life, analysts have described the response to the Pentagon attack as being a successful one. During the response, 106 patients received medical treatment by area hospitals, care centers, and clinics. Of these 106 patients, only one person perished during treatment from her injuries.

During the Pentagon response, there were a number of factors that led to a successful response, mitigation, and recovery effort, and a number of challenges that the ACFD and other responding agencies faced. Among the factors that helped us were four major points:

- 1) **The ACFD had strong pre-existing relationships with surrounding jurisdictions and the affected federal agencies.** Due to years of working together, the ACFD had strong support from the City of Alexandria; Fairfax, Prince William and Loudoun county fire departments; the Metropolitan Washington Airports Authority; and other departments within the NCR. The FBI Washington Field Office established a fire liaison position in 1998 to work with local fire departments. The close working relationship between FBI Special Agent Chris Combs, a former New York firefighter, and the ACFD incident command staff played an especially beneficial role in ensuring a coordinated response.

Many of these relationships were developed through planning exercises. For example, the Military District of Washington hosts a major tabletop exercise each year, which allows the leaders of federal and local government organizations to learn to work together. In addition, Arlington County had conducted a May 2001 tabletop exercise with military authorities about a scenario which featured a commuter airplane crashing into the Pentagon. This exercise helped the agencies to become familiar both with their own disaster plans and the plans of their military and civilian counterparts.

- 2) **Unified command through the Incident Command System ensured an effective response.** Within three minutes of the crash, then-Battalion Chief Bob Cornwell arrived on scene and established incident command. I arrived within 10 minutes of the crash and assumed incident command. Because the primary agencies responding to the incident all understood the Incident Command System (ICS), we were able to establish incident command within minutes and most of the other supporting agencies were able to operate within the framework. The fire departments in Northern Virginia began using ICS in the late 1980s and the Metropolitan Washington Council of Governments (COG) adopted the National Interagency Incident Management System (NIIMS) in March 2001, so that there already was a common command system in place. While the Military District of Washington has its own command structure, it cooperated with the ACFD as a member of unified command and provided necessary resources.
- 3) **A well-designed and exercised mutual aid system provided timely resources.** At the time of the incident, and continuing today, Arlington County was a partner in the Northern Virginia Response Agreement wherein the jurisdictions provide automatic aid based on the closest fire and EMS unit, not jurisdictional boundaries. The departments operate under the same standard operating procedures and dispatch protocols. Also, there was a mutual aid agreement between the member governments of COG which was developed following the Air Florida crash in 1982. Finally, there was a statewide mutual-aid agreement which enabled outlying jurisdictions to respond or to backfill for Alexandria and Fairfax County stations, while their units provided assistance to the ACFD.
- 4) **The Metropolitan Medical Response System laid the groundwork for successful coordination between emergency response and public health officials:** After the 1995 sarin nerve agent incident in Tokyo, the ACFD realized that American first response agencies did not have the capability to respond to such an attack. At the request of Chief Plaugher and the ACFD leadership, the COG requested federal assistance in building this capability. By working with the U.S. Public Health Service, the ACFD was able to develop the nation's first locally-based terrorism response team with a hazardous materials, medical management, and mass-casualty decontamination capability, the Metropolitan Medical Strike Team (MMST). This capability became the Metropolitan Medical Response System (MMRS) and National Medical Response Team. The frequent use of exercises by the MMST and technical rescue teams provided for a coordinated response by the ACFD and surrounding jurisdictions. For example, the Arlington

technical rescue team was able to integrate its personnel with the Alexandria team to form three teams of 19 persons each.

Despite the number of factors that led to a successful response, the ACFD also faced a number of challenges. The seven main challenges were:

- 1) **Self-dispatch created problems with the response.** As news of the attack spread throughout the city, first responders from around the NCR arrived on scene to help with the response. These responders began aiding with the response without the request of the incident commander or knowledge of the host organization. In every major incident, self-dispatch is a problem. Unrequested volunteers are well-meaning, but they can complicate response operations by creating confusion at the incident scene. Also, if the incident commander is unaware of their actions, the self-dispatchers can put themselves at risk if they become injured or trapped. For long-term response and recovery operations, self-dispatched volunteers frequently do not come with the necessary food and shelter that they require, which creates an additional burden on the community trying to deal with the existing incident.
- 2) **Public safety communications were problematic during the Pentagon response.** During the first hours of the response, cell phone networks were jammed, and cellular priority access service was not provided to emergency responders. Radio channels and phone lines to the emergency communications center also were jammed. In addition, there were problems with interoperability between jurisdictions. Pagers and runners proved to be the most effective form of communication. On September 12, the Incident Command Operations Section re-organized the fire suppression units into four divisions. This improved communications during the second day of operations.
- 3) **The Pentagon response identified room for improvement in the emergency medical response.** During the response, triage tags were not used to document the care of victims. In addition, there was no system to document where patients were sent for treatment. The after-action report also identified the need for a clearinghouse hospital to coordinate communications on behalf of the medical community and disseminate patient disposition and treatment information.
- 4) **Logistics proved to be a challenge during the long-term incident response.** Like many jurisdictions, the ACFD did not have the logistical infrastructure for dealing with an incident of the magnitude or duration of the Pentagon response. The stock of personal protective equipment (PPE), self-contained breathing apparatus (SCBA), batteries, medical supplies, and equipment for reserve vehicles were not sufficient for sustained operations. Fuel was a major requirement: in the first 24 hours, 600 gallons of diesel fuel were consumed. The resupply effort required 12 tractor-trailer loads for shoring operations, more than 5,000 pairs of gloves, thousands of Tyvek hazmat protection suits, and hundreds of respirators, SCBA, and air bottles. The Arlington County government, surrounding jurisdictions, like Fairfax County, and local business and relief organizations provided vital assistance in meeting this challenge.

- 5) **The need for credible situational information was a challenge during the incident.** During the first two days of the response, it was important to get accurate situational information. The Pentagon incident scene had to be evacuated three times in the first 25 hours due to reports of incoming aircraft. These evacuations delayed some of the response operations and caused confusion at the incident scene.
- 6) **Resources also proved to be a challenge during the response.** The after-action report identified the need for Arlington County to have a facility designed and equipped as an emergency operations center. It also recommended that the Arlington County Police Department upgrade its mobile command unit and that the fire department obtain a mobile command vehicle for on-scene incident management. The report identified improvements that needed to be completed in the emergency communications center to enhance communications and operations during another major incident. In addition, ACFD and other departments did not have access to a deployable supply of mass casualty supplies, which meant that medical supplies had to be taken from EMS units.
- 7) **The Pentagon response demonstrated the need for a credentialing system for first responders.** During the response and recovery effort, it was important to make sure that authorized first responders had access to the incident scene. Unfortunately, there was no credentialing system to identify personnel and their skills. The DHS has worked on a number of reports and pilot projects over the years to address this system, but it currently remains unresolved. A First Responder Access Card was pilot-tested, but it proved to be too expensive and too hard for jurisdictions to maintain the database. The DHS' Office of Infrastructure Protection has developed a new system with state and local first responders, which has been adopted by four states. Another six states are in the process of adopting it.

Application of Lessons Learned

The nation has transformed its emergency response system since the attack on the Pentagon. The Final Report of the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States (also known as the 9/11 Commission Report) described the events leading up to the 9/11 attacks, the attacks themselves, and the response. In addition, it made a number of recommendations, many of which Congress has implemented through legislation. Overall, federal, state, and local agencies; the private sector; and members of the American public have made many changes over the years based on the responses to 9/11 to better prepare the nation for future terrorist threats.

The federal government has become an important partner in the effort to prepare for the next terrorist attack. It has established a National Preparedness Goal and 31 core capabilities to help the nation to prevent, protect, mitigate, respond to, and recover from an incident, whether from natural or human cause. In addition, the federal government has sponsored training to respond to terrorist attacks, and exercises at the federal, state, tribal, territorial, and local level. The federal government also has spent approximately \$37 billion since 2002 on grant programs to help state and local agencies develop the training, equipment, and staffing resources required to meet the terrorist threat.

One important development is the adoption of the National Incident Management System (NIMS). The NIMS is the comprehensive, nationwide approach to incident management. Based on the ICS that the fire and emergency service uses, it allows jurisdictions around the country to work together in response to an emergency. Much as fire departments were able to coordinate and respond together during the 9/11 response to the Pentagon, response agencies from around the nation will be able to work together to respond to future all-hazards events using NIMS. NIMS is scalable and can be used for any national incident, no matter the size or duration. The NIMS system is focused on defining core terminology and defining resources, so that a fire chief can request an asset from anywhere in the United States and have a reasonable expectation of what is being received. Federal grant programs provide assistance in NIMS adoption, because a grantee must comply with NIMS in order to receive grants from the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA).

In addition, there is an improved focus on mutual aid and collaboration. Mutual aid from surrounding departments played a major role in the response to the Pentagon attack. There is a greater emphasis now on multidisciplinary exercises that bring federal, state, tribal, territorial and local agencies together to build partnerships and prepare for future threats. One of the most important lessons from the Pentagon response is that it is important for the leaders and staff of federal, state, tribal, territorial, and local agencies to work and plan before any incident occurs. These existing relationships will create an effective response when it is needed. It is important to highlight the role that federal grant programs, such as the Urban Areas Security Initiative (UASI) and MMRS, serve as incentives for bringing all of the agencies together before a terrorist attack happens.

One primary focus since the Pentagon incident is the need to improve communications interoperability. DHS offices, including the Office of Emergency Communications and the Office for Interoperability and Compatibility, have played an important role in facilitating improved communications between state and local public safety agencies. SAFECOM is a federal effort, led by local first responders, to improve multi-jurisdictional and intergovernmental communications interoperability. It trains emergency responders to be communications unit leaders during all-hazards emergency operations, and coordinates grant guidance to use federal funding to encourage interoperability. SAFECOM focuses both on technology and the need for jurisdictions to develop an effective command interoperability plan. President Obama and Congress also made an important decision to improve future public safety communications by setting aside 20 MHz for a dedicated nationwide public safety broadband network and establishing the First Responder Network Authority (FirstNet) to govern it as part of the Middle Class Tax Relief and Job Creation Act of 2012 (P.L. 112-96).¹

There also is an increased focus on improving information sharing between federal, state, and local response agencies. The federal government has helped to fund 78 fusion centers around the nation that serve as focal points for receiving, analyzing, and sharing threat-related information between federal, state, local, tribal, and territorial partners. In addition, programs like the

¹ It is important to note that FirstNet will originally cover only broadband data communications, such as streaming video. Local first responders will need to continue to rely upon land-mobile radio for mission-critical voice communications for at least the next ten years.

Nationwide Suspicious Activity Reporting Initiative and “See Something, Say Something” campaign allow first responders to report possible threats in their jurisdictions.

At the local level, jurisdictions around the NCR implemented changes to improve their response to future terrorist attacks. Funding by the UASI program allowed the NCR agencies to develop standardized regional capabilities, including mass casualty units and ambulance buses; bomb teams; and air units to refill firefighters’ SCBAs during an incident. The NCR jurisdictions also used UASI funds to interconnect the local fiber optic networks into one “NCR Net.” This system uses the seamless transition of critical data, including computer-aided dispatch systems, throughout the region to improve situational awareness and reduce emergency call processing time.

Challenges for the Future

It is important to recognize that, even though the attack on the Pentagon took place 13 years ago, we are still learning to respond to the threat of terrorism. New threats continuously appear and we must adapt to them. For example, while we still must prepare for an explosive attack on a major transportation hub or an act of bioterrorism, we also have to prepare for the use of fire as a weapon in a terrorist attack or an active shooter assault by a small team as happened in Mumbai in 2008 and Nairobi in 2013.

In recognition of this fact, I would like to raise the following issues for the committee’s jurisdiction:

- 1) **We need to continue to focus on NIMS adoption.** One of the keys to any successful response is the ability for various units to communicate and operate together. The adoption of NIMS requires a culture change, and we still need to bridge organizational and professional biases. We need to review NIMS training and ensure that federal, state, local, tribal and territorial partners are all adopting NIMS and operating with it.
- 2) **We need to make sure that lessons learned are being shared to improve the homeland security enterprise.** We need to better broadcast successful uses of grant programs and encourage the adoption of successful policies. For example, the NCR developed a patient tracking system to track victims’ basic information and conditions, which allows them to be distributed to hospitals and tracked throughout their time in the system. If another jurisdiction is interested in developing a similar system, it should be able to find out about it at a clearinghouse instead of having to re-invent the wheel.

In addition, we should support the development of regional response systems. The Pentagon response relied upon resources throughout the Washington and Northern Virginia areas. This coordination was established years before through the activities of the COG. One of the IAFC’s concerns with the National Preparedness Grant Program proposal is its state-centric focus, which we think might break down the sort of regional coordination required to effectively respond to cross-border incidents.

- 3) **We need to improve information sharing both about the potential for terrorist activity and during an incident.** The attacks on 9/11 exposed a host of information sharing problems at the federal, state, tribal, territorial and local level, both before and during the incident. During the Pentagon response, the incident scene had to be evacuated three times, due to the perceived threat of another incoming airplane. At least two of these incidents were caused by federal officials arriving in Washington to help with the federal response to these attacks. The federal government needs to make sure that accurate information is being relayed to the first responders on scene so that they can make the appropriate decisions.

In addition, problems still remain with the information sharing enterprise. The need for a security clearance remains a barrier for some fire chiefs to access information. However, once a chief receives information, he or she is limited with what can be done with it, because command staff may not have clearances. In other cases, information may be over-classified or not written with a practical purpose. The National Counterterrorism Center's (NCTC) Joint Counterterrorism Assessment Team helps to solve this problem by bringing local first responders to the NCTC to work with intelligence analysts to develop intelligence products with practical information that first responders can use to protect their communities. To help fire chiefs better understand how to access threat information for their communities, the IAFC developed the Homeland Security Intelligence Guide for Fire Chiefs.

- 4) **We need to ensure that local first response agencies are being reimbursed for their mutual aid activities.** The National Preparedness Goal aims to create a national network of resources and capabilities. However, it is important to recognize that state and local governments spend approximately \$218 billion annually for public safety. When a resource is dispatched from a locality across local or state lines to help with a mutual aid response, the local first response agency potentially can lose those resources for weeks and will have to backfill to protect its community. For major emergencies, such as Hurricane Katrina and the October 2007 California wildland fires, a local fire department can be left waiting for months or even years to get reimbursed. In many jurisdictions, budgets remain tight and a local fire and EMS department cannot wait that long to be reimbursed. The IAFC is concerned that fire and emergency departments will not be as responsive to future requests for assistance during major national emergencies if the reimbursement system is not reformed and improved.

Conclusion

I would like to thank the committee for the opportunity to discuss the response to the Pentagon attack on 9/11 and the lessons learned from it. The events of 9/11 were a terrible tragedy. The nation has made many improvements to its national preparedness system to prevent such a tragedy from happening again. However, the terrorist threat continues to adapt, and we must adapt to meet it. Both the IAFC and I look forward to working with the committee to face these new challenges and protect our communities.