



STATEMENT OF

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BEFORE

THE COMMITTEE ON
HOMELAND SECURITY

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My name is Tom Currao, Assistant Chief with the New York City Fire Department. Thank you for the honor and privilege of providing testimony today. I have 34 years of experience with the FDNY and have served as the Chief of Counterterrorism and Emergency Preparedness, Chief of Training and the Chief of Fire Prevention. Twenty-Five years since the horrific events of September 11th, the greatest and most meaningful way by which we respect the memories of those who we have lost is by analyzing the lessons of tragedy and applying our best solutions so that we may preserve life and property as part of our sworn duty and life safety mission.

September 11th, 2001 should have been a special day for my family, as we were looking forward to seeing off my oldest son Bryan to his first day of pre-school, and we were enjoying the expansion of our family with the recent arrival of my second child, Brendan. I was off duty that day, and as I became aware of the terrible events unfolding and the phone ringing with the FDNY notification of recalling the entire department to duty – the anticipation of those happy events, quickly transferred to disbelief, shock and the driving need to get to my command as quickly as I could do try to assist in any way possible. When others ask me what I remember most about that day, it is my wife Lisa, holding my newborn Brendan in her arms – yelling out the window – “Tom, they just hit the Pentagon” and thinking for the first time in my career with the FDNY whether I was ever going to see my family again.

My personal reflection on that day, despite the immense challenges and impact on my family and as a member of the FDNY, serve as the bedrock foundation of my future journey in the FDNY, as I sought to make sense of all this loss and what I can do personally to more effectively prepare the fire service within the context of the threat of terrorism, and what I would like most to share with you all this morning.

In the 25 years since September 11th, 2001, the fire service and homeland security community have evolved and matured in our analysis and defining of threats, developing and implementing strategies for assessment, prevention, protection, mitigation, response and recovery, continuity of operations planning and providing high levels of education and training to our members. One of the main lessons has been the need to look through the “All Hazards Lense” and improve those core tools such as situational awareness, common operating picture, interagency and interjurisdictional coordination and collaboration, integrated tactical and strategic communications as well as many others that are cross cutting and apply to all emergency events – terrorism, natural disasters and accidental occurrences. This has become particularly meaningful as funding and grant allocations have decreased over the years, and made the efficient analysis of threats, vulnerabilities and consequences even more vital so that dollars spent on training, exercises, planning, and equipping the first responder community are leveraged to the fullest extent and with maximum effectiveness.

When terrorism, disasters and large-scale emergencies strike they are first and foremost local events. Multi-agency incident management, fire suppression, mass casualty victim triage and treatment, first responder safety, property and environmental protection, scene stabilization and de-escalation, and recovery are dependent on a whole community approach and teamwork. This teamwork must be applied within the context of defining community risk by addressing the following questions:

- *What are the greatest threats to the community?*

- *How vulnerable is the community to these threats?*
- *What are the consequences for the community?*

This risk analysis drives the setting of preparedness priorities, and effective leveraging of resources, serving as an effective tool in developing the whole community approach and interagency collaboration within any town, city or municipality to achieve terrorism and all hazard preparedness.

Comprehensive risk analysis and setting preparedness priorities, is predicated on the fire service continuing to have a seat at the intelligence enterprise table – not only as a consumer but also a playing a vital role in the development of threat assessments, from our unique fire responder perspective. At the FDNY, and within the city of New York, we have been very fortunate to build and continue strong information and intelligence sharing relationships with the New York City Police Department as well as FBI's Joint Terrorism Task Force. The FDNY is very fortunate to have both fire service intelligence analysts as well as Bureau of Fire Investigation Fire Marshal's as part of the Joint Terrorism Task Force.

This supports all of the FDNY's counterterrorism and preparedness efforts, particularly our FDNY Center for Terrorism and Disaster Preparedness. This Center, the only one of its kind to my knowledge in the nation, regularly develops intelligence products, such as the Watchline, that is transmitted across the entire nation and fire service community to share insights, preparedness recommendations, operational and safety considerations as well as lessons learned. It is via the Center for Terrorism and Disaster Preparedness, as well as strong partners at the FDNY Special Operations Command and FDNY Bureau of Fire Investigation, that we integrate with the entire homeland security enterprise to give back and be a valued partner for national, regional and local preparedness.

We thank the Congress for the many years of grant funding support that have led to the creation and improvement of many FDNY response resources such as the Fire Department Operations Center, Marine Firefighting/Rescue/Emergency Medical Regional Assets, Unmanned Aerial Vehicle/Robotics Program, Incident Management Team, Special Operations Task Forces, and Hazardous Materials Weapons of Mass Destruction response assets. All of these comprehensive response and preparedness capabilities have proven their tremendous value at fires, emergencies, whether related to terrorism, natural disasters or other emergencies, over the last 25 years. Most notably, within the context of the 250th anniversary of the United States Declaration of Independence, as well as the global FIFA World Cup Soccer Tournament as well as annual National Special Security Events such as the UN General Assembly. It is at these types of occasions and incidents that the first responder resources, capabilities and capacities that you all have supported over the last 25 years come together in a synergistic homeland security enterprise to support the first responder community's life safety and property protection mission.

This integrated homeland security enterprise is as vital today as it has ever been over the last 25 years to attain comprehensive preparedness and operational readiness. It provides the base as we continue to address both traditional threats, such as targeted violence, active shooter, use of improvised explosives, weapons of mass destruction, unmanned aerial devices and fire/smoke as a weapon but also dynamic cyber-security threats, the disruptive utilization of mis/dis/mal information, as well as concerns over potential negative impacts related to artificial intelligence and machine learning. To realistically manage many of these challenges will involve embracing all levels of expertise in cyber security and technology

innovation to strike the imperative balance between practical use while establishing safeguards to illegal and destructive use.

The breadth and depth of threats is as challenging as ever, but so is the evolution of how we meet those challenges. This is characterized by imagination and innovation, partnering with all potential stakeholders, many who we may never have initially considered such as the FDNY's Bureau of Fire Prevention and Code Development Unit. These important entities develop and implement Fire Code and Emergency Action Planning provisions, address the increasing dangers of fire, smoke and toxic by-products particularly in dense urban environments with aging infrastructure, and also within the dynamic homeland security threat context for both operational planning, drills, training and exercises well as strategic problem solving and decision-making. This process is often implemented in close coordination with interagency first response partners but also the private sector, building managers and on-scene life safety personnel as part of their comprehensive fire and life safety planning. The line between non-terror life safety issues and dynamic threats and attack modalities can be blurred, leading to complex risk analysis and management, but also requiring our commitment to an All-Hazards Mindset and networked preparedness with all potential stakeholders.

One homeland security challenge that I would like to highlight is the continual need to build upon fire service-law enforcement efforts to address the dynamic threat of fire and smoke as a weapon.

Although Fire and Smoke has been utilized as a weapon of war and terrorism throughout human history, the pivotal event that highlights its use is the 2008 Mumbai Attacks in India. During this tragic event, 10 attackers associated the terror group Laskar-e-Tayyiba, stormed multiple buildings, deploying a range of attack modalities, including the use of fire and smoke, that took the lives of 164 people. This threat challenges our tactical, operational and strategic response and mitigation planning, preparedness and response due to the potential presence of attack modalities that we are not trained for or have a familiarity/experience in mitigation. Responding law enforcement must deal with the presence of fire, smoke and toxic gases. The fire and EMS community must deal with the potential of armed and actively attacking perpetrators. Most importantly, preparation for this type of response requires courage and a "thinking outside the box" mentality by senior fire, EMS and law enforcement leaders to take up this preparedness challenge and place their faith in a truly interagency training and response partnership. This partnership is based on the theory of bi-directional responsibility in which each agency is not only dedicated and responsible for its own mission but the success of their partner agency.

What Are Our Highest Priorities for the Future and what recommendations can I offer today?

Commit to continued dialogue with the first responder community so that we can jointly support the vital need for homeland security funding as a matter of national, regional, and local preparedness, within the context of a continually evolving threat environment to meet the mandate of our mission to protect and serve the public.

Advocate and coordinate with the Department of Homeland Security to support the maintenance and expansion of appropriate clearances at the Secret and Top-Secret level for Non-Law enforcement homeland security stakeholders.

Continue to build upon intelligence sharing mechanisms between investigative and law enforcement community and first responder/emergency medical/public health community. For instance, the caveat Law Enforcement Sensitive, coupled with intelligence sharing barriers related to case investigation concerns, can sometimes provide an obstacle to comprehensive situational awareness and preparedness efforts by non-law enforcement homeland security stakeholders. Intelligence, law enforcement and the first responder community need to continually commit to developing mechanisms for sharing threat intelligence linked to the operational needs of the fire, emergency medical and public health members, with an articulated need to know, while appropriately protecting investigative details. The use of this classification should be incorporated in training and education across the homeland security enterprise and reinforced in preparedness exercises.

Advocate for increased investment in homeland security academic education to fully prepare the next generation of professionals. Commit to increased partnerships with higher education institutions, meaningful internships and partnership to leverage in solving complex homeland security problems. This includes universities and colleges that focus on academic programs that support homeland security missions such as cybersecurity, health sciences and public administration. |

Commit to the memorialization of succession planning programs to successfully on-board talent and experience across the homeland security enterprise. Research programs such as the “Silver Star” program that brings back knowledgeable and experienced retirees as consultants.

Advocate for the continued establishment of public-private partnerships, where appropriate, to solve complex homeland security issues. Establish a framework for identification of issues, prioritization of needs, outreach and selection of private partners, project management and tracking of benchmarks and objective accomplishment.

Establish a multi-agency, multi-disciplinary working group to study the homeland security preparedness and continuity of operations impact of dynamic challenges/opportunities in artificial intelligence.

Establish a multi-agency working group to study the effectiveness of the National Incident Management System-Incident Command System with regard to unified fire service/law enforcement operations and conduct a historical analysis to identify gaps in communications, planning, integrated command and operations, as well as develop recommendations to improve the Incident Command System model.

Convene a multi-agency, multi-jurisdictional working group to analyze the success of pandemic improvement planning, leveraging lessons learned from the COVID-19 Pandemic, to accurately gauge the current level of national-regional- state-local public health and emergency medical coordination and addressing gaps that still exist.

As you can see, in the 25 years since September 11th, 2001, there has been much progress within the fire service in regard to homeland security and emergency preparedness but there is also much to accomplish into the future. Our commitment to protecting our most vital asset – the public and our communities – and to continually building local, regional and national partnerships and tirelessly working toward achieving the highest state of preparedness and operational readiness, has never been stronger. That is our unwavering commitment to you.

Thank you very much for the honor and privilege to address you today.