

The United States Congress
Committee on Homeland Security
September 16, 2026

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Terrorism, as defined by The Department of Homeland Security, is nothing new to the City of New York. From the 1864 attempt by eight Confederate operatives to burn a large area of the City, (Which ironically accelerated New York's establishment of a paid Fire Department – Now the FDNY – a few months later), to the Wall Street bombing of 1920 which killed 38 and wounded more than 100, to the “Mad Bomber” of the 1940's and 1950's, Anti-war bombings and the FALN of the 1960's and 1970's, to the attacks on the World Trade Center in 1983 and 2001. In the 25 years since 9/11, terrorist attacks in New York City, albeit on a smaller scale, have continued. Some involving groups and others involving individuals. The weapons used have varied from improvised explosive devices to firearms, knives, hatchets, and vehicles. What weapons will be used in possible, or should we say probable, future attacks – drones, chemical/biological, cyber-attacks, etc. – must be constantly planned for. The challenges are immense.

While the Fire Department has always stood ready to protect life and property in New York City and has responded to acts of terrorism throughout its history, its focus on terrorism had been somewhat minimal prior to the attack on the World Trade Center in 1983. In February of that year, terrorists parked a van filled with explosive material in the garage under the Towers. A long fuse was lit, allowing the perpetrators time to escape before detonation. The terrorists' intention was to bring down one tower into the other, causing the collapse of both and thousands of deaths.

While the detonation caused considerable damage and numerous deaths and injuries, the towers survived the blast.

Following this attack and the extensive response and operations of the City's Fire and Police Departments, planning and preparedness in our city increased. Efforts were undertaken to better prepare both agencies for future acts of terrorism. In 1996, The Mayor's Office of Emergency Management, OEM, under the effective leadership of the late Jerome Hauer, was created. OEM was tasked with coordinating the response of City agencies to all forms of emergencies. OEM planned inter-agency training and drills and helped improve coordination and communication. While OEM proved effective in improving the overall response to and coordination at emergencies, In September 2001 it was still a work-in-progress.

The morning of September 11th, 2001, began as a brilliantly clear and bright late-summer day. In the hour between 8:00 and 9:00 AM, FDNY members in fire houses throughout the city were in the midst of a shift change with members preparing to head home while others prepared to relieve them. At Headquarters, the work of the day began, with the Department's leadership engaged in the business of managing the busiest Fire Department in the world.

FDNY Headquarters is located across the East River from the World Trade Center, in the MetroTech Complex in Brooklyn, between the Brooklyn and Manhattan Bridges. I was FDNY's Chief of Operations, second in command to Chief of Department Peter Ganci. Our offices on the seventh floor of Headquarters had windows facing the towers. Just before 8:47 AM I entered my office following an earlier meeting when I heard a loud noise and felt the building shake. At that instant Chief Ganci shouted out to me: "Dan, look out of your window. A plane has just hit the World Trade Center." We did not know what type of plane it was or why it had struck the building's upper floors.

We later learned that it was American Airlines flight 11, a large Boeing 767 which had recently taken off, bound for California with its fuel tanks full of jet fuel.

Chief Ganci and I responded together toward the Twin Towers over a miraculously traffic-free Brooklyn Bridge. From the bridge we had a clear view of the impact area in the north tower, 1 World Trade Center. Seeing what appeared to be 10 floors of intense fire, one thousand feet up, I said two things to Chief Ganci, (although I am sure he was already thinking the same thing.) “This will be the worst day of our lives”, and “we cannot put out that much fire on the upper floors of the building.” Chief Ganci immediately transmitted a fifth alarm, bringing 250 Department members to the scene.

We quickly arrived and began to establish our command post on West Street at the foot of the north tower. Units, commanded by Battalion Chief Joseph Pfeiffer, were already inside the tower. Soon after our arrival, at 9:03 a loud noise caused me to look up just as United Airlines flight 175, another 767 bound for California, travelling over five hundred miles per hour, struck the south tower, 2 World Trade Center, floors 77 to 85. Now our somewhat impossible task had doubled in size. The two tallest building in New York City had been attacked by terrorists, were seriously damaged and burning out of control. A second fifth alarm was transmitted, (eventually followed by a third fifth alarm). An unknown number of people were trapped at and above the damaged floors in both towers, and many others below the stricken floors were having difficulty exiting the buildings. The impact of the hijacked airliners caused the elevators (all but two serving lower floors) to become damaged and inoperable. The standpipe systems, designed to allow water for firefighting to be pumped to the upper floors, had also been damaged and presumed to be inoperable as well.

Although, as I stated early on, I believed extinguishment, at this point, was beyond our capacity, that did not mean we would just stand by. 911 calls from occupants trapped in the towers answered at our dispatch center were unimaginably frantic and heart-wrenching. All our dispatchers could do was to tell the callers to hang-on, we are coming for you. And we were. Without elevator service, reaching the upper floors was exceedingly difficult and time-consuming. But we would do our absolute best to climb to the impact area and try to reach those trapped. In the south tower we know, from members' communications captured by recording devices, that our members had reached the impact area and were preparing to advance up one partially obstructed stairway when suddenly that communication ceased.

At 9:58:59 the south tower collapsed. Total collapse took only 11 seconds. While we were prepared for and expected localized collapses within the towers, this was not anticipated, certainly not at this stage in our operations. Chief Ganci issued the order for our members to remove themselves from the north tower. Many were able to get out, while others were either too high-up in the building or assisting occupants. At 9:58:59 the north tower collapsed. Chief Ganci and First Deputy Commissioner William Feehan, while assisting in the rescue of members trapped in the south tower's collapse, were struck by debris from the north tower and killed. We discovered their bodies later that afternoon.

The collapses caused damage and numerous fires in surrounding buildings and vehicles and damaged our water supply system. Our surviving units, and other units brought in, were tasked with finding ways to deal with that as well as searching for survivors. As the afternoon wore on, World Trade Center 7, a 47-story building just across Vesey Street from what was the north tower, began to worry us. We ordered our members out of the building and cleared a collapse zone. At 5:20 that afternoon, 7 World Trade Center collapsed.

At some time that day we learned that American Airline flight 77 had struck the Pentagon in Washington, and United Airlines flight 93 had crashed near Shanksville, Pennsylvania. A total of 2977 innocent people were killed on September 11th, 2001. 2,753 in New York (including 343 members of the Fire Department (FDNY), 37 from the Port Authority Police Department (PAPD), and 23 from the New York City Police Department (NYPD), 184 at the Pentagon, and 40 in Shanksville.

Books have been written about the days that followed, but I will try to briefly sum it up. The entire area that was the World Trade Center looked other-worldly. Fires burned for 99 days beneath what remained. While the first week to 10 days was referred to as a rescue operation, few people were rescued, and none after September 12th. After the rescue effort became a recovery operation, work continued until May 30, 2002. FDNY members, their counterparts in The NYPD and PAPD, as well as many others, remained on-scene, searching for the victim's remains, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week until that final day. To date, of the 2,753 victims at the World Trade Center, the remains of roughly 40% have not yet been identified.

Were we prepared for the attack on the World Trade Center of September 11th 2001? As John Miller, a former Deputy Commissioner at NYPD, is quoted as saying: "Using commercial airplanes as missiles being flown by trained pilots wasn't on anyone's frame of reference." That being said, all of us on the Federal, State and local level have made great progress in studying, planning and thwarting current and future terrorist attacks.

At the Fire Department we have always reviewed our actions following fatal fires, complicated operations, and unusual responses. What did we do right? What mistakes were made? What could we have done better and what needs to change to make us an even better Department?

No response in our history had more fatalities and was more complicated and unusual than what I have just summarized. We believed it would be helpful to ask for expert help in our review and critique. We contacted the consulting firm McKinsey and Company and they agreed to work with us. Some important suggestions contained in the final report of that review have made us a better Department. More able to meet future challenges.

One is rooted in the assistance we received from the US Forest Service immediately after the attacks. When I first heard that they were coming to assist us I was quite skeptical. What do forest fire specialists have to do with our urban environment? The Forest Service manages events that may last for weeks and months. FDNY generally puts-out the fire, returns the property to the owners or the NYPD and gets ready for the next alarm. The operations at the World Trade Center site would be ongoing. The Forest Service taught us how best to manage a long-term incident. Afterwards we decided to form our own Incident Management Team, The IMT, (now consisting of over 300 trained members). When I returned to the Department in 2014, I found The IMT to be one of the biggest improvements. They have helped manage many events here and across the country. Our response to the COVID crisis is a perfect example. They were invaluable.

It was suggested that we needed more robust Haz-Mat capabilities. Five Haz-Tec engine companies were created with highly trained members, giving us the ability to respond to and mitigate multiple incidents.

A new Bureau was created to ensure we were prepared for the challenges of our ever-changing world. The FDNY Center for Terrorism and Disaster Preparedness works with our Federal, State and City partners, staying up to date with current threats and planning and conducting response scenarios and drills.

Members of this unit have high-level security clearance as do Ranking Department members who are regularly apprised of threat environments.

Many other large and small adjustments were made to our Department, such as the addition of two state-of-the-art fireboats, drones, robotics, improved communications, changes in counselling and family assistance as well as a World Trade Center Health Program monitoring all members impacted by their response to the attack of 9/11 and their work in the days after.

We certainly have depended upon and continue to depend on the Federal funding that has made these improvements possible and look forward to continued support. Thank you for all that you have done and for conducting this hearing today.