

Statement of James Schwartz
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House Homeland Security Committee

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Chairman Garbarino, Ranking Member Thompson, members of the committee; thank you for the opportunity to share with you today some thoughts as we reflect on the tragic events of twenty-five years ago.

On September 11, 2001, 184 people lost their lives in the Pentagon attack, 59 on the aircraft and 125 in the building. They ranged in age from three to seventy-one. As we reflect on that day twenty-five years ago our first thoughts should be with the families who lost loved ones and who don't need an anniversary to remind them of precious lives cut tragically short. But for the fact that the area where the airplane struck was all but empty due to the building's first ever renovation, those losses would have been significantly greater.

We also cannot forget the heroes in the Pentagon that day, military and civilian alike, who acted with great courage and resolve to save their co-workers, in some cases reentering the burning building multiple times to guide colleagues out through the fire and smoke.

The 9/11 Commission in their landmark report observed about the response at the Pentagon that ***"While no emergency response is flawless the response to the terrorist attack at the Pentagon was mainly a success for three reasons: first the strong professional relationships and trust established among emergency responders; second, the adoption of the Incident Command System; and third, the pursuit of a regional approach to emergency response"*** (p. 314).

None of what the commission observed was the result of happenstance or luck. For decades before 9/11 public safety leaders from around the Washington metropolitan area, actively supported by elected officials through the Council of Governments (COG), collaborated on issues that are often hindered by a parochial approach to government services. Mutual aid agreements were struck with the knowledge and expectation that when events overwhelmed a locality, it could depend on neighboring jurisdictions to come to its aid. Regional plans for mass casualty events were developed and tested. The ability to communicate across public safety radio systems so that responders from different jurisdictions and professions could communicate with one another had been achieved by several jurisdictions and was in the works for the remainder of the National Capital Region.

However incomplete the 9/11 Commission's observations about the Pentagon response, their framing provides the opportunity to consider important factors to both successes and shortcomings but also the way we have applied these lessons over two and a half decades.

Relationships and Trust

The success of emergency service organizations is the result of many efforts not all of which come from within the organization. Public safety leaders today should recognize that the boundaries that separate professions or jurisdictions are useless during a novel crisis. The investment in developing such relationships can help to grease difficult operational challenges especially when they present conflicting priorities. Developing trusted relationships and mutual understanding before the crisis will better aid those the system was created to serve.

The attack on the Pentagon made clear was that no one agency had all the resources, experience, or expertise to bring the event to a successful conclusion. Acknowledging the interdependence among dozens of agencies and professions was essential. Developing relationships and working on a common understanding before the crisis is a major factor in successfully managing any complex incident.

One of the strongest and most valuable partnerships on 9/11 was between the FBI and the regions fire departments. 9/11 tested for the first time the 1995 presidential directive that places the FBI as the lead law enforcement agency for all acts of terrorism. How that would work in the face of a major disaster had yet to be tested. Fortunately, we in the NCR had established a strong relationship with the FBI Washington Field Office's National Capital Response Squad. The NCRS had participated in regional exercises as recently as three days before the attack and on the morning of the attack were training with all the fire department heavy rescue squads in the region on preparations for large scale demonstrations the region was anticipating later that fall.

The Bureau's first agents arrived at the Pentagon minutes after the first fire department units arrived and collaborative decision making through unified command was initiated immediately. Because of our investment in building a professional relationship and mutual understanding there was no battle for turf. Both the Bureau and the Arlington County Fire Department knew that success would only occur if we worked together and applied the knowledge and respect that we had gained from each other over the previous three years.

Incident Management

The 9/11 Commission observed that the use of the incident command system was another positive factor at the Pentagon. ICS was implemented by the first arriving unit four minutes after the airplane struck the building and unified command including the Arlington County Fire and

Police Departments and the FBI was established eight minutes later. This was before the federal government incorporated incident command as national doctrine through National Incident Management System in 2004. Under NIMS, ICS is a standardized process for managing a crisis across jurisdictions and professional disciplines. It's hard to imagine a better framework that unifies response agencies under shared objectives, common terminology and that is scalable to the size and complexity of the incident. Fire and EMS use ICS every day for every incident.

Unfortunately, NIMS has not gained universal acceptance as evidenced by too many after action reviews in the last two and a half decades that identified the lack of effective incident management as a leading cause of sub-optimal outcomes.

After more than twenty years as national doctrine it is time to assess where we are with NIMS, make improvements to the doctrine as necessary, assess how we teach it and stop pretending that because we ask grant recipients to "certify" that they use NIMS that we are any closer to a truly national approach to incident management than we were twenty-five years ago.

Regionalism

Lastly, the 9/11 Commission observed the pursuit of a regional approach to response as an asset. That pursuit began long before the attack. Prompted by the 1973 collapse of a high-rise apartment building under construction, fire chiefs in Arlington, Alexandria, and Fairfax County began collaborating on automatic aid. In 1975 they signed the NOVA Agreement that essentially dropped jurisdictional boundaries for the purpose of allocating resources; the closest units are assigned to a request for service. The benefits are faster service to those in need and faster back-up and increased safety for responders. Over the years, additional jurisdictions have been added to the agreement and the region further benefits from standardized operating procedures and complete communications interoperability. Last year the NOVA Agreement celebrated 50 years of continuous

The northern Virginia localities are also members of the Washington Metropolitan Area Council of Governments. COG is used as a forum to collaborate on regional problems that are not confined by jurisdictional boundaries and is overseen by a board of elected representatives from each of the twenty-four member jurisdictions creating legitimacy at the policy level. The region's fire chiefs have long had a committee and several technical sub-committees at COG.

Through NOVA and COG the chiefs have recognized that they are building capacity that goes beyond routine emergencies. But by using such a system every day builds strength, collaboration, and trust to be exploited when the big one comes.

Soon after the tragedy of 9/11 there was discussion of developing a national system of response. This was in recognition that for some incidents, even a region the size of the NCR still

needs outside assistance. The International Association of Fire Chiefs developed a Fire Service Mutual Aid System to improve interstate mutual aid. The effort later transitioned to the National Mutual Aid System. Its purpose was to address some of the concerns with the Emergency Management Assistance Compact (EMAC) where, because of the bidding system the closest available resources are often not deployed thus delaying support. Additionally, local fire and EMS departments must wait years for financial reimbursement after deploying to a major incident. We urge congress to examine the issue of interstate mutual aid to ensure that the closest resources are deployed efficiently during a disaster.

I want to thank the committee for taking the time to hold this hearing and I look forward to the continued conversation on these important topics.