
TESTIMONY OF
THE FORMER COMMISSIONER OF THE NEW YORK CITY
OFFICE OF EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT
RICHARD J. SHEIRER
OPENING REMARKS BEFORE
THE NATIONAL COMMISSION ON TERRORIST ATTACKS
UPON THE UNITED STATES

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Mr. Chairman and Members of the Commission:

Thank you for providing me with the opportunity and privilege to testify today.

The importance of this undertaking cannot be underestimated. September 11, 2001, is one of the most significant days in our nation's history. The response in New York City was exceptional. This City's emergency service and public safety personnel conducted the greatest rescue operation in the face of the worst terrorist attack this country has ever seen. The show of humanity, here, across the country and around the world, on 9/11, and in the days, weeks, and months that followed, was extraordinary.

On September 11th, the world witnessed selfless sacrifice at a level unprecedented. In my 34 years in public safety, I have seen bravery, courage and sacrifice, but what I saw on 9/11 was without equal. On that day, firefighters, police officers, EMTs, court officers and ordinary people – who we will never know – refused to abandon their fellow citizens in the face of certain injury, and ultimately, lost their lives with those they were trying to save.

I was the Director of the Mayor's Office of Emergency Management (OEM). OEM had been in existence in the Office of the Mayor since 1996, when Mayor Giuliani, recognizing the

need to enhance inter-agency coordination in planning, preparing and responding to emergency situations, created the Mayoral agency. OEM was comprised of personnel drawn from various City agencies, including the Police, Fire, Health, and Environmental Protection Departments. OEM's responsibilities included coordinating and assisting in emergency response, monitoring the City for emergency conditions and incidents, and operating the Emergency Operations Center (EOC) from where the City was able to manage large or unique multi-agency events.

A crucial part of OEM's mandate was to develop interagency emergency response plans, and organize joint training exercises among City agencies under those plans. Coordinated response plans were created, with assistance and input from participating agencies, regarding various types of incidents ranging from coastal storm plans to biological terrorist attacks. We conducted numerous drills and tabletop exercises to test those plans and we modified them as needed. In addition to all of the drills, OEM, the Police Department, Fire Department and other agencies responded to emergencies in the City on a daily basis. Even though we could not have planned exactly for the events of September 11th, the emergency response plans we had in place, and our extensive training and experience, helped prepare us for that day.

On the morning of September 11th, I was at City Hall when I received a telephone call from the OEM Watch Command informing me that a plane had crashed into the North Tower of the World Trade Center.

The OEM Watch Command, which was located at the OEM Offices in 7 World Trade Center, acted as the eyes and ears of the City. Twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, it monitored all emergency services frequencies, New York State and National alert systems, weather systems, and local, national and international news. In the event of an emergency or

serious incident, the Watch Command would dispatch the appropriate OEM responders and notify the senior OEM staff.

After I received the call from Watch Command, I stepped outside on to the portico of City Hall and I could see the black smoke rising, the gaping hole and the burning tower. I knew at that moment this was not a small plane - that there would be terrible losses, that this was one of the worst disasters we had ever faced, and that this would be one of the biggest fire and rescue operations we had ever put in place.

I headed toward the North Tower right away and entered the World Trade Center complex through the concourse level below the buildings. People were already evacuating; however, everyone was calm and orderly, and there was no panic. I was struck by the contrast from the evacuation after the 1993 bombing of the World Trade Center – in 1993 there was significant chaos and confusion. On 9/11, it was so quiet and controlled that it was almost eerie.

From the concourse I proceeded to the lobby of the North Tower where the initial Fire command post was located. OEM First Deputy Director John Odematt, Deputy Director Richard Rotanz, Deputy Director of Operations Calvin Drayton, Deputy Director of Health Programs and Assistant Chief of EMS Ed Gabriel, and FDNY Captain Kevin Culley, an OEM Responder, were at the Fire command post in the lobby assisting in the operation. Upon my arrival in the tower lobby, I re-confirmed with my deputies that the EOC had been activated.

Activating the EOC involved notifying all the appropriate City agencies, and requesting the agencies send their designated representative to the EOC. For an emergency of this scale, almost all areas of City Government along with State, Federal, Voluntary Service and Private Sector organizations would be involved. OEM staff at the EOC also contacted the State Emergency Management Office (SEMO) and the Federal Emergency Management Agency

(FEMA). The OEM command vehicle was ordered to the scene to provide an on-site OEM command center.

In the North Tower, OEM was monitoring inter-agency operations at the lobby command post. The purpose of OEM at emergencies is to assist the Incident Commander, to help coordinate with the various other agencies, to provide information, and to supply additional resources as requested. OEM is rarely the Incident Commander, but rather, provides vital support and assistance to the agency leading the emergency operation, and to the other agencies that are involved.

An example of OEM's role on 9/11 was when EMS began setting up a triage area for the injured in the lobby of the North Tower. Working with EMS, we determined that we should move the triage area from the North Tower lobby into the lobby of 7 World Trade. It was important to keep the tower lobby clear for the fire and rescue operation and the civilian evacuation, and to locate the triage where it would be most accessible.

The operation in the lobby of the North Tower was professional, controlled and organized. It is one of the many roles of public safety to bring a sense of calm and control to chaotic and frightening circumstances. While it was a horrific event, at this point it was still primarily a high rise fire situation. The Fire Department was clearly in command of the fire fighting, rescue and building evacuation. The Police Department was directing the evacuation of civilians away from the World Trade Center, and securing both the perimeter of the site and the rest of the City. In addition to the evacuation of the World Trade Center complex, the Police Department had begun evacuating the thousands of people in the surrounding office and residential buildings. When I subsequently saw photos of the mass departure across the Hudson River to New Jersey it truly looked like Dunkirk.

When the second plane hit the South Tower, we felt an explosion in the North Tower lobby, but at first we did not know what it was. I was immediately notified over the radio by the EOC about what had happened.

Almost instantly after the South Tower had been hit, I contacted the EOC to confirm that air support was on its way to New York. At that time, the EOC informed me that there were still planes unaccounted for that may have been heading for New York. I relayed this information to the command post in the North Tower lobby. At the same time, OEM evacuated the EOC. The rest of 7 World Trade Center had been evacuated earlier, but after the report of a possible third plane, we had to get our people out of the building.

I received a radio transmission from FDNY Captain Joe Folino, an OEM responder, who informed me that the Mayor had requested that I join him and Police Commissioner Bernard Kerik at 75 Barclay Street, where they were establishing a temporary executive command center. I left the North Tower lobby and went to Barclay Street.

In addition to the Mayor and the Police Commissioner, several Deputy Mayors and Senior City Hall staff were at the command post. The Mayor was on the phone with the White House, and had been told the White House was being evacuated. Suddenly, the building began to shake, and someone yelled the towers were coming down. We could hear the roar of the building collapsing, and then there was silence and darkness. A Deputy Police Commissioner came into our building covered in dust and bleeding, and he confirmed that the South Tower had collapsed. I could only imagine the thousands of people that we had just lost.

As the dust cleared somewhat and the light returned, OEM Watch Command conducted a roll call of OEM personnel – everyone was accounted for. The OEM representatives that had been at the West Street Fire command post were directed, along with the firefighters and Chiefs,

by Chief of Department Pete Ganci to move the command post north while Chief Ganci and Deputy Commissioner Bill Feehan went south to assess the situation.

We left Barclay Street and walked north. As we walked, the North Tower Collapsed. There are almost no words to describe the feeling at that moment.

What had been the largest rescue operation in history, again was forced to multiply – now there were two massive building collapses, raging fires under the wreckage and in surrounding buildings, and potentially thousands of people missing, injured or dead.

Then we heard planes overhead – looking up I realized they were ours – the first American military jets had arrived. They gave us a sense of reassurance, and reminded us that we were not alone.

We stopped at the firehouse on Sixth Avenue and Houston Street to regroup and organize our next steps. It was decided that the Police Academy would be the best location for a temporary command center.

Once at the Academy, the Mayor and his staff re-established the seat of government, and the Police Department and OEM created a new, temporary EOC in the library. Within approximately two and 1/2 hours, the EOC was fully operational, with hard phone lines, computers, and accommodations for 30+ agencies. We included space and equipment for federal and state agencies, such as SEMO and FEMA

One of OEM's responsibilities is to always be thinking of what will be needed next. At this point, we were already working, in conjunction with other agencies, on the logistics of the rescue operation. We were ordering supplies and equipment for the rescue effort. We determined where and how we would move in the necessary trucks and heavy machinery. Air quality testing of the site was initiated. We started to develop plans for how to move and where

to locate the debris and the steel from the site. We requested Disaster Medical Assistance Teams and Disaster Mortuary Operation Response Teams and other assistance from FEMA. FEMA and SEMO provided immeasurable assistance to the emergency management operation. Representatives from FEMA and SEMO offered us the full extent of the agency's resources, and worked closely with the City on 9/11 and in all aspects of the rescue and recovery.

We were already receiving incredible help from the private sector. For example, television and movie production companies provided the lights we needed to keep the operation going through the night on 9/11, construction companies contributed equipment and lighting, and construction workers provided their time and expertise.

The response of the City to this catastrophe was extraordinary. The Fire and Police Departments, as well as other City agencies, performed at and beyond expectations, and in accordance with their training and experience.

There has been much talk about coordination and communication between the Departments. Before I became the Director of OEM, I had worked at both the Fire Department and the Police Department. I am aware, perhaps more so than many, of the competition between those two agencies over the last 30 years. Under the leadership of Mayor Giuliani, Police Commissioners Howard Safir and Bernard Kerik, and Fire Commissioner Tom Von Essen, cooperation between the New York City Police and Fire Departments was unparalleled. I also believe that the creation OEM helped to facilitate that cooperation. Most importantly, on September 11th, there was no rivalry, there was no competition. The one goal was saving lives, and both agencies performed their duties and responsibilities in exemplary fashion.

As I mentioned earlier, the Fire and Police Departments had different responsibilities, and accordingly, different requirements in order to run their part of the City's response. The Fire

Department command needed to be close to the fire and to run the rescue effort from the inside. The Police Department command did not need to be inside the buildings, but did need to be on the perimeter to secure the site, close the streets, direct evacuation from lower Manhattan, and to focus on security threats in other parts of the City. An effective incident command system clearly provides for such a unified command where two or more agencies maintain authority and manage distinct aspects of an emergency situation. Further, we know there was a police liaison at the overall Fire command post, and there were OEM representatives at all the command posts.

As for communication, while clearly the events of the morning interfered with everyone's ability to communicate, there are also audiotapes from that day that demonstrate there was significant communication within and between the Police and Fire Departments. While we will never know for certain what information made it through, we do know that there were numerous attempts by each of the Departments to convey and share information as best they could.

The loss of the OEM EOC at 7 World Trade made the operation more difficult to run, but OEM personnel continued to perform their functions in the field, and we regrouped and activated a new EOC as soon as possible.

However, we still had much more work to do. We needed to provide services to the victims, the survivors and to the public. We determined that a bigger and consolidated EOC with greater capabilities was necessary. Within 36 hours, OEM, with the help of Federal, State and City resources, and the help of many others, had established an entirely new, expansive and fully operational command center on Pier 92. Over a hundred agencies, both government and non-government, such as the American Red Cross, were working out of the Pier. We also established a Family Assistance Center on the adjacent pier for those who had lost love ones, and PBS Channel 13 provided their facility for use as a 24-hour Family Assistance Call Center.

In the days, weeks and months that followed 9/11, OEM oversaw the continuing operation at the World Trade Center site, and was responsible for anticipating and meeting all needs of that effort. The dedicated emergency service personnel, construction workers and volunteers worked 24 hours a day, seven days a week until the rescue and recovery operation finally ended in May 2002. Thankfully, we did not lose a single person during that dangerous and very difficult work.

There are so many unsung heroes of September 11th, from the Office of the Chief Medical Examiner, that has and continues to do everything possible to help families find some peace, to the hundreds of volunteers who refused to sleep for days as they searched for any possible survivors.

There is no way we can ever adequately thank all of the people in our City, our Country and from around the world, who came to our aid and provided support, day in and day out, for weeks and months following 9/11. If I were to spend every hour of every day for the rest of my life writing thank you notes, I still would never be able to say thank you to all of them.

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I have been asked by the Commission to provide some recommendations based upon our experience on September 11th. The world has changed since 9/11 and the following recommendations utilize the events of 9/11 as starting point.

- Review command and control protocols to ensure both flexibility and effectiveness.
- Maintain hardened and secure Emergency Management agencies.
- Develop substantially well equipped mobile Emergency Operation Centers.

- Improve all emergency communication capabilities.
- Develop and implement local and national support plans and systems to manage the aftermath of an incident – to rebuild and restore – and to provide victim services.
- Improve biological, chemical, radiological and nuclear preparedness and response capability. There must be significant focus on the availability of both permanent and portable laboratory capacity and effectiveness.
- Increase education of all public safety officials regarding crisis management and coordinated emergency response. Historically, firefighters fought fires, police officers fought crime and EMS workers treated the injured. Now, all emergency service personnel must work together to fight terrorism.
- Increase support for relentless preparation and training of local, state and national emergency responders.