

TESTIMONY OF JEROME M. HAUER
BEFORE THE
NATIONAL COMMISSION ON TERRORIST ATTACKS UPON THE UNITED STATES

May 19, 2004

Mr. Chairman and members of the Commission, thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today. My name is Jerome Hauer. I was the first Director of the Mayor's Office of Emergency Management in New York City. I had the honor of working for Rudy Giuliani for 4 years during which time we built one of the strongest emergency management programs in the country.

The issues that you have asked me to address today are not only critical to understanding New York City's overall response to the attacks on September 11th but also to understanding how to better prepare New York and the nation to manage an event like it in the future.

Since the attacks on September 11th I have spent a lot of time soul searching--looking at what went right that day and what went wrong. I have tried to understand what could have been done to better prepare the City to manage such an incident. I've looked back and wondered what could have reduced the loss of lives of our valiant heroes from the Fire, Police and Emergency Medical services and whether anything could have been done to minimize the loss of life of innocent civilians.

Let me begin by saying that I believe New York was the most prepared City in the United States. We worked for 4 years to build an emergency response system that could manage almost any crisis. We were recognized nationally and internationally for the work we did and were used as a model by cities all over the globe. Clearly the foundation that we built was central to the city's response on September 11th. All the planning and training, all the efforts to ensure that agencies and people knew their roles, a Mayor that was personally involved in many of the drills that we ran and who sent a clear message to all agencies that emergency preparedness was one of his top priorities, paid off during an attack that no one had conceived of. Because of this effort, the city was able to continue to function and respond the way it did.

What we did was basic. We started out in 1996 by taking the few emergency plans that the city had and began rewriting them with an inclusive planning process. Any agency at the City, State or Federal level, or any utility or entity in the private sector that had any possible responsibility for managing or assisting in the mitigation of a particular emergency was invited to our planning meetings. The plans were written and distributed to all agencies for review. Once a plan was completed we did tabletop exercises to test the plan and modified them based on the outcomes of the exercise.

We attempted to do a tabletop, or field exercise every eight to twelve weeks. We also held comprehensive field and command post exercises to test our chemical and biological response plans. New York was the first city in the nation to develop a Biological Response Plan and to have a tabletop exercise to test it. We held the Nation's largest chemical terrorism exercise as well as the first infrastructure exercise to look at the impact on the City, when confronted with the loss of components of our critical infrastructure.

We assembled the Mayor's Task force on Bioterrorism, a group of some of the nation's leading experts on the subject, including Nobel Laureate, Dr. Joshua Lederberg. We also put together a chemical terrorism working group and broke it down into planning functions such as personal protective equipment, communications, and command and control. Similarly the Bioterrorism task force was broken into functional areas like surveillance, mass/clinical care, mass fatality management and mass distribution of antibiotics. The models we developed for mass distribution of antibiotics and for mass care of the injured are now the basis for the Department of Health and Human Service's planning on a national level.

We also held the first cross jurisdictional exercise with Nassau County to test our communications and coordination capabilities in response to a plane crash on Rockaway Boulevard similar to the one that occurred in 1975, something that had never been tested before.

In 1996 we began planning for terrorist events in a far more detailed way than the city had ever done before or since. We started out by looking at threats. Most of the information we received was from open source documents as we could not get threat information from any law enforcement or intelligence agency. In fact as we were doing our planning for bioterrorism we could not even get a federal agency to tell us what threat agents we needed to worry about. Following a series of meetings with some of the nation's leading experts on biological agents, we put our own list together.

As we looked at threats, particularly from chemical and biological agents, we broke the incidents down to their components and defined what was needed to respond for each part of an evolving incident. Long before any Federal funds were available, I approached the Mayor and asked for funding to enhance our efforts. Without hesitation he approved over 10 million dollars. We began to buy antidotes, decontamination equipment and specialized containment vessels for extremely hazardous materials. We put in place the country's first surveillance system for detecting unusual patterns of disease, a system that has been modeled by cities nationally.

I must say that as we did our planning and looked at what we thought was every type of events that could strike New York City, we never looked up. We looked at every conceivable threat that anyone on the staff could think of, be it natural or intentional but not the use of aircraft as missiles.

A central component of our planning efforts was to define an incident command system. Mayor Giuliani wanted a clear line of authority and one agency that was responsible for the management of an incident.

As we continued to plan, we attempted to get the Police and Fire Departments to communicate on both a common radio frequency at hazardous materials incidents and on an 800 megahertz frequency at major emergencies. We were unable to get the 2 groups to share a common frequency at hazardous materials emergencies and the 800 megahertz radios were carried by fire chiefs, although rarely used, but not by the Police Department. The interoperable radio project that the Department of Information Technology had been working on continued along with slow progress.

As I look back at September 11th and what might have had an impact on the number of people lost, I see our inability to get the departments to talk with one another on a common frequency as one of the issues that might have had an impact in reducing the loss of life. Additionally had there been a senior police liaison at the command post and/or a fire chief in the helicopter that could communicate with the command post on the ground, information about what they were observing in the air could have been relayed to the ground.

Having said that I also believe that even if the firefighters and in the building knew of a potential collapse, many would have continued to try rescuing the trapped civilians and their fellow firefighters and would not have left the buildings. Likewise many of the police officers in the building would have stayed knowing that civilians and fellow officers were in the building.

Let me conclude by saying that I believe that the ongoing battle in the City over an incident command system creates a very dangerous situation. During my tenure under Rudy Giuliani decisions were made and the Police and Fire Department's worked within those decisions. We worked through issues, sometimes contentiously but we always knew who was making decisions at an emergency and the mayor knew who to turn to for answers. OEM served as a referee when needed but at the scene of an emergency OEM served as the coordinating agency and not the Incident Commander. During city wide emergencies such as the heat wave in 1999 and West Nile Virus in the same year OEM took the lead in coordinating all city agency activity.

Assertions that no incident command system can properly define who in charge at all situations are simply wrong. Managing emergencies in a city like New York requires leadership and a clear definition of roles. It also requires good planning and interagency communications before, during and after an event.

As horrific as the events of September 11th were, they were limited in scope and geography. The next incident will involve simultaneous attacks in a single or multiple cities, the use of chemical or biological agents or the use of a nuclear device.

A well coordinated incident management system facilitates an effective multi-agency response, the lack of one only leads to confusion and the potential for increased and morbidity and mortality.

If we want to try to reduce the loss of life following a terrorist attack we need to be proactive.

New York needs an incident command system that works, one that allows for good interagency coordination, like the one that was created by Rudy Giuliani and OEM. New York needs to get the roles of the emergency response agencies clearly defined. Too much time is spent on needless haggling over who's in charge when the time would be better spent in interagency drills and training.

This city was the best prepared in the nation. Preparedness is a process, not an endpoint. We had done a lot to prepare New York. There was more that needed to be done. I'm very proud to have been a part of getting it to where it was.

Thank you for allowing me this time.