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In Crisis, New York's Emergency Office Was Thwarted by Its Past

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BODY:

It was designed to be cutting edge and thus deeply reassuring to a city that knew it was a target for terror: a mayoral office of emergency management that would prepare for the worst and oversee the response when the worst hit.

The agency would help coordinate the police and fire departments and serve, when needed, as the chief commander. Millions of dollars were poured into it. Bioterrorism was studied and a plan of action was written. The mayor, Rudolph W. Giuliani, trumpeted the agency's vision and effectiveness. Officials called it a model for other cities.

But whatever its grand ambitions, the city's Office of Emergency Management, when crisis struck, found itself marginalized and overwhelmed, and the destruction of its command center was only the most visible of its problems.

On the morning of Sept. 11, the agency, while working to assist an emergency response that was valiant in spirit and that helped evacuate thousands from the twin towers, could do little as some police officers acted without orders and others found no strong leader. It did not get commanders of the Police and Fire Departments to talk to one another during the crisis. It could not help coordinate the recall to duty of all firefighters across the city, in part because virtually none of the firefighters knew what to do in the event of such a recall.

In fact, it turned out the emergency agency had run just one joint drill for these and other groups in the 18 months before the attacks -- and it was a tabletop exercise, not field training.

And so a year after New York learned -- at a spectacularly painful price -- that it needed to scrutinize and improve its emergency response apparatus, many city and law enforcement officials believe fixing the Office of Emergency Management is absolutely vital. If it is not improved, they believe, any professions that New York is a safer and better prepared city lack great meaning. The idea of such an emergency office, these officials say, is sound. If it was beset with political infighting and perhaps publicly oversold, it can still be made to work. Indeed, they say, the dimensions of the threat to the city demand that it be revamped and fully legitimized.

"Considering the new realities that we have to face, O.E.M. is indispensable to our planning and preparations for all the things we hope will never occur," Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg said through a spokesman. "The new world requires responses that we never had before."

Of course, establishing a capable emergency management agency is just one of the many challenges the city is facing as it tries to improve security, identify

and eliminate threats and organize itself for what most officials expect will be future attacks.

The Police Department has hired a former Central Intelligence Agency official to improve its access to critical information on terror groups, and it has assigned its own detectives to work with the police in several cities overseas. Armed officers are now stationed at airports and at bridges virtually full time. The city's vast array of "sensitive locations" have received increased monitoring. Hospitals across the city are working on being ready for a major biological or chemical assault.

How well any of these initiatives succeed in helping to create a more secure city is an open question. Certainly, however, for many of the city's new initiatives to become reality, they will need more than the good intentions of the police and fire departments, the city's health officials and scores of other federal, state and local agencies.

"Do we really need a superagency and how should it function?" Jerome H. Skolnick, a professor at the New York University School of Law and co-director of the Center for Research in Crime and Justice there, said of the city's emergency management agency. "What are its goals? What are its standards? How are you going to evaluate its success or failure? Can you get the police and fire agencies to coordinate by defining what their mission and capacities are and to train them for those missions?"

The questions are more than serious, for one of the truths of Sept. 11 was that however bad it was, it might have been worse. The buildings could have fallen in different, even more destructive ways. There might have been more planes slamming into more landmarks. The attacks could have included bioterrorism. Coordination of efforts was a priority but was unrealized.

Richard J. Sheirer, the former commissioner of the Office of Emergency Management, who was in charge on Sept. 11, defended the agency's performance that day and in subsequent days. He said that 18 months before the attacks, he inherited an agency beset by problems caused by personality clashes, and that he had been working to fix them. And he blasted the two recent reports by consultants on the city's emergency response that day because the firm had failed to talk to him or to Mr. Giuliani.

"That is unprofessional," he said.

One of the undisputed startling facts about the performance of the agency was that it had failed to fully establish the most basic aspect of emergency response: determining who is in charge -- and when, and why. In fact, that most fundamental part of the agency's mission -- having all city agencies abide by a formal system that lays out under what circumstances police, fire or other officials take control of an emergency -- to this day does not exist in the way it does in other cities: one uniform, written set of rules that all agencies abide by.

The system, known as incident command, is intended to help agencies work together to direct strategy and share information. Analysts from around the nation said it is a cornerstone of emergency management. Without such understandings, chaotic moments can only worsen, the analysts said.

In California, the incident-command system was modeled on the military's responses and embraced by firefighters. "There has been this national effort to adopt an incident command system as a response protocol for all agencies," said Ellis M. Stanley Sr., the general manager of the Emergency Preparedness Department in Los Angeles.

Police Commissioner Raymond W. Kelly said such a system was never enshrined here, but was still up for discussion. "People can get wrapped around the axle about incident command when it really has to do with communication," he said. "Getting together, communicating, coordinating."

Fire Commissioner Nicholas Scoppetta said he was hopeful that a more formalized system of incident command could be reached. He said a series of guidelines written by emergency management officials in the late 1990's has been resurrected "and we will update it and I think it is something we ought to exercise citywide."

As part of the examination of the emergency office, the city is using a \$2.5 million grant from the Justice Department to pay an outside consultant to study the office's response on Sept. 11, said John T. Odermatt, the agency's new commissioner. That work will begin on Oct. 1, he said, and a draft report should be ready by year end.

In the days, weeks and months after the attack, there was much the agency did right, Mr. Odermatt said. It set up a temporary command post, managed the rapid removal of debris from ground zero and monitored a host of human services. "But yet," he said, "there are things that we could have done better."

Already, Mr. Odermatt, a former city police chief, has rewritten most of the agency's emergency plans and reorganized its personnel, appointing a deputy commissioner for preparedness and a liaison with law enforcement agencies to share intelligence on threats.

Since the agency's \$13 million emergency center on the 23rd floor of 7 World Trade Center was reduced to rubble on Sept. 11, a site for a new command center has been established in Brooklyn. A backup center, a Plan B site, has been identified.

To upgrade the coordination efforts between the police, fire and other city agencies, Mr. Odermatt said they must drill and train together. Since he took over in April, he has held two interagency drills to practice mass distribution of medications and review the city's response to a biological attack. A third citywide drill, to be conducted by the United States Naval War College, is set for October.

"My vision is simple," Mr. Odermatt said. "To get the agency to its most prepared state and to continue to practice, practice, practice." He also has a public relations goal: To ensure that the public becomes aware of all the hazards it faces and to become so educated that it can respond to them on its own.

The changes are necessary because the Office of Emergency Management was plagued by politics from the start and later suffered a long period in which it languished, many current and former city officials said.

It began in 1996 with many ambitious thoughts. It answered calls from the mundane to the exotic, from fires to coastal storms to anthrax and mosquito-borne encephalitis.

Its first leader was by all accounts among the nation's quintessential emergency professionals: Jerome M. Hauer, who is now the acting assistant secretary for public health emergency preparedness at the federal Department of Health and Human Services. In the early days, he ran the agency like a think tank, forecasting cataclysms and drawing up response plans.

Once plans were on paper, the agency had to communicate them to the rest of the city, sell the idea, enforce those rules and make sure the agencies were training together.

But feuds erupted. The Police Department, at times, was a reluctant partner and maintained its own crisis center. And attempts to get the Police and Fire Departments to rely on each other proved all but futile. Indeed, the rivalry between the two departments often made it difficult for the agency to reach its goals. When 50 senior Fire Department officials took part in a planning exercise with the Naval War College last December, some fire chiefs plainly spelled out their resentment of the police.

"Give firefighters guns and close the P.D.," one wrote. "Give us their budget."

The extent of the trouble between the two departments can be measured in the modest degree to which they are now working together. Top commanders from each department are meeting regularly with their counterparts. The departments have exchanged one liaison officer each. And fire chiefs are riding in police helicopters to assess disasters better, something, incidentally, that they had already done in the 1980's as a strategy to fight high-rise fires, said Raymond J. Abruzzi, a retired New York Police assistant chief.

What also hampered the Office of Emergency Management's effectiveness was a bitter rivalry between Mr. Hauer and Howard Safir, who had pushed for the agency's creation when he was fire commissioner but seemed to backpedal when he became police commissioner in 1996, many people said. "As much as Howard was supporting the creation of O.E.M. when he was in the Fire Department, to take it away from the police, he wasn't necessarily as supportive when he became the police commissioner," said Peter G. LaPorte, who worked for Mr. Safir's predecessor in Police Headquarters, William J. Bratton, and is now the director of the Emergency Management Agency in the District of Columbia.

Mr. Safir said that Mr. Hauer's leadership hindered the agency's effectiveness. Others, however, said it was Mr. Safir's personality that stymied its ability to succeed.

The strained relations sometimes played out on the streets. One incident, cited by some in and out of city government, happened in 1999 when a Manhattan Planned Parenthood clinic received an anthrax scare. As the story goes, police officials who showed up first apologetically said they had orders from headquarters to keep fire officials and Mr. Hauer's staff from entering. Mr. Hauer called City Hall from the scene and was finally allowed to enter.

Mr. Hauer said he tried to eliminate technological barriers to cooperation. Police and Fire Department radios work on different frequencies. Past city officials had been meeting for years on the topic, but did not develop firm plans. Mr. Hauer devised a system using 800-megahertz radios to enable the police, firefighters and officials of his agency to speak with one another.

Radios were distributed, but when the officials sat down to delineate when to put down agency radios and pick up the interagency radios, a written agreement could not be forged. That technical inability to reach an agreement frustrated Mr. Hauer and was evident on Sept. 11, when some of the 800-megahertz radios sat idle in the vehicles of some emergency responders, former city officials said.

"At the end of the day, not much moved forward," Mr. Hauer said of the issue.

Michael P. Jacobson, a professor at John Jay College of Criminal Justice, served in Democratic and Republican city administrations as a budget official and as a probation and correction commissioner. "I think it was a good idea to create the agency," he said. "But, you had to know that given the existing turf wars already between police and fire, that the introduction of another powerful emergency responder agency was going to cause a new host of bureaucratic and turf issues. No one should be surprised that it might have taken a few years to work out."

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