

One year later

Three states struck by the Sept. 11 attacks move forward

BY CHRISTOPHER HUNT

The terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001 spurred many changes in how the federal government operates — the amount of money it spends on defense, the proposal to create a new cabinet-level department of homeland security and shifts in foreign policy, to name but three. But what of the states? One year later, what have they done to prepare for — or hopefully prevent — other tragedies like those that happened in New York, Pennsylvania and Virginia one year ago this month?

The nation's emergency management system has been preparing for terrorist attacks since the 1995 bombing of the Alfred P. Murrah federal building in Oklahoma City. Many of the changes made after that event were in place on Sept. 11. So, in the case of many states, the past year has been spent augmenting existing disaster response structures and legal systems.

George Foresman, Virginia's Deputy Assistant to the Governor for Commonwealth Preparedness, notes that Virginia had been preparing for terrorist attacks well before the attack on the Pentagon on Sept. 11 through cooperation with the federal government and the District of Columbia.

"Because of our proximity to Washington, D.C., we were a great site to do a wide range of [terrorism response] exercises and we felt like we had a pretty good handle on things prior to 9/11," Foresman said.

It has been reported that several of the Sept. 11 terrorists had Virginia driver's licenses, and this fact was not lost on government leaders. "We discovered the loophole and closed it administratively," Foresman said.

Pennsylvania, site of a plane crash on Sept. 11, has been working on terrorism

preparedness for many years, with several key efforts begun in earnest during the Gulf War.

"In 1997, the Pennsylvania Emergency Management Agency (PEMA) was successful in reorganizing our state-sponsored urban search and rescue (USAR) team, PA Task Force One," said David L. Smith, Director of PEMA. "The team was effective in supporting states impacted by Hurricane Floyd and also the evening of Sept. 11, 2001, we were the first out-of-state USAR team to arrive in New York City to support New York City's response to the World Trade Center disaster. Pennsylvania is also home to a National Guard weapons of mass destruction (WMD) civil support team (one of 17 nationally)."

In New York, site of the attacks on the World Trade Center, officials point to the integration of agencies as a visible change after Sept. 11. "Under the governor's leadership, we've come a long way from where we were," said Ed Jacoby, Emergency Management Director of New York. Jacoby noted the overall challenge of integrating the efforts of the many agencies involved responding to terrorist attacks, particularly interagency communications systems.

State administrative changes intended to address terrorism were generally made on the authority of a governor's executive order or legislation. In several cases, however, changes were made based on verbal authority alone, according to a 50-state survey conducted by CSG and the National Emergency Management Association (NEMA) called "*State Organizational Structures for Homeland Security*."


That report (available online at www.nemaweb.org), summarizes the actions of all 50 states and the District of Columbia. Highlights include:



- Nineteen states have created new positions, offices or agencies to handle homeland security issues. Of those 19 states, three made their changes in writing through some sort of executive order or legislation.
- Thirty-eight states have created a terrorism task force, working group, committee or council that is maintained as an advisory/expert body for the state's homeland security and anti-terrorism efforts. Of those 38 states, 45 percent established their group through executive order and only 10 percent through legislation.
- All 50 states maintain a primary point of contact for anti-terrorism/homeland security efforts.

Another step states have taken is the Emergency Management Assistance Compact. EMAC is a legally binding, contractual arrangement between 47 states, the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands that establishes a way for states to send personnel and equipment to help disaster relief efforts in other states.

Unlike some changes in government operations, terrorism preparedness is many times very visible to the general public.

"Fundamentally, the big thing that has changed post-Sept. 11, is that we are living differently in Virginia," Foresman said. "There continue to be military personnel at government buildings, you see more state police than you did before, there are still restrictions on general aviation traffic. There is a sustained focus on the part of the legislature. I've never seen anything like it in 20 years." 

— Christopher Hunt is the Web Editor for *The Council of State Governments*.