

Pentagon Report

ARLINGTON COUNTY
STARTS IMPLEMENTING
CHANGES URGED
IN 9/11 REPORT

■ PAM WEIGER



AFTER-

The mutual-aid response to the Pentagon in Arlington, Virginia, on September 11, 2001, was automatic. Among the regional fire departments first on the scene was the Metropolitan Washington Airports Authority, whose two foam units from nearby Reagan National Airport are fighting the impact-zone fire behind the Annandale, Virginia, ambulance.



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HE TERRORIST ATTACKS OF SEPTEMBER 11, 2001, forced fire departments across the United States to rethink the way they operate. Many implemented changes based on media reports or word-of-mouth information from other public safety officials.

Now, a report on the Pentagon response provides concrete recommendations and guidance for dealing with mass destruction.

From the moment American Airlines Flight 77 crashed into the Pentagon in Arlington County, Virginia, the county fire and rescue department was responsible for a major mass-casualty incident that lasted 10 days and strained the department's resources to their limits. Ten months later, the federally funded *Arlington County After-Action Report on the September 11 Terrorist Attack on the Pentagon* concluded that the strategic vision, tactical leadership, flexibility and breadth of capabilities, and technical competence of the department and its leadership led to a successful response to the attack.

Arlington County used a \$400,000 grant from the U.S. Department of Justice to contract with Titan Systems Corporation of San Diego, California, to develop the report, incorporating information from all the agencies that participated in the response. The county and neighboring jurisdictions began incorporating the report's recommendations into their standard operating procedures (SOPs) immediately after, sometimes even before, the report was released in July.

Nearly 200 pages long, the report makes 235 recommendations and observations in four sections devoted to fire department operations, the response of hospitals and clinics, the law enforcement response, and the actions of the emergency management/emergency operations center. One hundred eleven of these recommendations and observations pertain to fire departments. Some are models other jurisdictions can emulate, while others describe challenges encountered during the

response that must be addressed if they're to be avoided in the future.

Among the areas in which the report recommends improvement are self-dispatching and staff recall; personnel accountability on the scene; reporting to the incident-command staging officer; fixed and mobile command and control facilities; radio compatibility; communications; logistics; staffing levels; and coordination with hospitals.

Automatic mutual aid

Although the report pointed out problems with self-dispatching and units operating outside the command structure, it also cited the

THE ARLINGTON COUNTY REPORT NOTES THAT UNITS FAILING TO REPORT TO THE INCIDENT COMMAND POST BEFORE JOINING THE FIREFIGHT AT THE PENTAGON CAUSED A MAJOR PROBLEM.

county's mutual-aid system and outside support as something other jurisdictions should emulate. Most fire chiefs in the Washington, D.C., metropolitan region applaud the strong mutual-aid system in northern Virginia, which includes SOPs that are consistent across jurisdictional lines.

"We were working on that more than a year ago," says Fire Chief Ed Stinnette of the Fairfax County, Virginia, Fire and Rescue Department. "We're almost to the point of sharing battalion chiefs across the lines on first-alarm assignments."

"The rest of the nation talks about mutual aid. We have automatic aid," says Fire Chief Tom Hawkins of Alexandria, Virginia. "We have the same command boards, the same systems."

Chief Hawkins believes that the mutual-aid problems cited in the report resulted simply because units weren't called in on September 11 using the normal sequential order.



This member of the Montgomery County, Maryland, Fire & Rescue was one of the many outside responders to the Pentagon.

Hawkins, whose department produced a "fairly exhaustive" internal report on September 11 late last year, said that, while the first several hours of an incident are bound to be chaotic, it falls upon the fire chief and the firefighters' own sense of discipline to prevent

them from responding to a scene before they're called to do so.

To that end, Hawkins and Alexandria's city manager have met with all fire department employees in small groups to explain the importance of not self-dispatching.

"I'd been criticized for not allowing everyone to go to the Pentagon," Hawkins says. "I was there when the Air Florida flight crashed into the 14th Street Bridge and the Potomac River in 1982, and I know that if people just rush in, that's when you lose people."

In March 2002, the Washington Metropolitan Council of Governments strengthened the regional mutual-aid agreement, which encompasses fire departments in Virginia, Maryland, and the District of Columbia. This year, a three-day training session has been planned for all the jurisdictions, covering incident command, high-rise firefighting, and mass-casualty incidents.

THE ARLINGTON COUNTY PENTAGON AFTER-ACTION REPORT CAN BE DOWNLOADED AT WWW.CO.ARLINGTON.VA.US/FIRE/EDU/ABOUT/PDF/AFTER_REPORT.PDF.

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Outside a unified structure

The Arlington County report also notes that units that failed to report to the incident command post before joining the firefight caused a major problem and recommends replacing “units that choose to operate outside a unified structure.” The report notes that the failure of units, including those that self-dispatched, to report to the incident-command staging officer “reduces management control, increases risk, and severely hinders accountability.”

The report singles out the Washington, D.C., Fire Department, in particular, for not following instructions on sending units to assist. Although chief officers in the District wouldn’t comment on the report, fire department spokesman Alan Etter says the department has modified its command system based on extensive revisions in the region’s emergency action plan.

“We’re aware of the criticism that we maintained our own command structure while under the command of Arlington County,” says Etter. “That was done to maintain a cohesive radio network, because our radios were the only ones that were working. We’ve made some revisions in our operations since September 11, but nothing based on information in the Arlington report.”

Accountability of personnel

Tangential to the issue of self-dispatching were problems with staff recall. Arlington County has already implemented a new staff-recall SOP and is currently developing Internet-based group-mail systems and a telestaff recall system. The county is also trying to upgrade its equipment, including pagers, which the report recommends issuing to all firefighters and emergency medical technicians.

The report also questions the passport accountability system currently used by fire departments nationwide, advising departments to consider developing a completely new badging and accountability system.

“Our current system, with Velcro and tags, is very labor-intensive for a mass-casualty situation,” says Fairfax County Chief Stinnette. “I’m sure if you don’t capture everyone’s tags early, it’s possible to have a unit or two out of place.”

Fairfax County is looking at bar codes, smart cards, and other new technologies that

may eliminate some of the accountability problems encountered at the Pentagon.

Command facilities and communications

Another criticism was the Arlington County Fire Department’s lack of fixed and mobile command and control facilities. In fact, the report calls almost every aspect of communications problematic, from the initial dispatch to operational instructions.

To remedy the problem, the department is using \$600,000 of a \$16 million federal grant to buy a mobile command unit, which it expects to place in service in about six months. Arlington County also received a grant from the National Institute of Justice to install on-board computers in all fire, EMS, and police units. And the department has filled all its vacant dispatch positions to maintain a minimum staffing level of seven police/fire/EMS dispatchers. Because the report said a minimum staffing level of seven dispatchers proved insufficient, the department is also reviewing the minimum staffing requirements for its dispatch center.

The radio incompatibility that plagued responders at both the Pentagon and the World Trade Center remains a great concern. In September 2001, Arlington County had a never-before-used communications computer hub that theoretically allows radios and cell phones on different frequencies to link to each other. However, it wasn’t used during the Pentagon response because the mechanics of getting it to the scene and programming it for all the agencies that responded were overwhelming, according to Assistant Chief James Schwartz, who commanded the incident.

Arlington County is now reviewing a proposal for a new First Responder™ communication and command system packaged by Raytheon Corporation that promises to link all public-safety and military radios and cell phones arriving at a command post. The proposed system includes radio-interoperability software; programmable radios; wireless LAN and video links; equipment compatible with Verizon, Cingular, and AT&T cell-phone networks; satellite and Global Star uplinks and telephone capabilities; and power and com-

FBI-Fire Service Liaison Pays Off

Arlington County’s training, exercises, and shared experiences earned the Pentagon after-action report’s praise under the category of capabilities others should emulate. Particularly noted was the well-established relationship between the fire department and the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), which began in 1998 when the FBI Washington field office established a fire liaison position to work specifically with local fire departments.

Special Agent Christopher Combs volunteered for the job. With eight years of experience as a volunteer firefighter in Freeport, New York, and New Berlin, Wisconsin, he was a natural choice.

“Everyone in my family is in the fire service,” Combs says. “Even the guy who married my sister.”

Combs, who was on the scene at the Pentagon within six minutes of the September 11 attack, says the message from the FBI top brass to all its field offices is to get better connected with the fire service, particularly the local haz-mat teams.

“I went to many presentations after Oklahoma City, and what I learned was liaison is everything,” he says. “Having an established relationship with the fire department is the key to the whole thing. If we don’t understand the fire department mission, then we can’t operate.”

Combs says the Bureau is now working to get firefighters, particularly bomb technicians, haz-mat specialists, and those involved in weapons of mass destruction incidents, through the FBI training course.

Meanwhile, Combs has been ordered to give presentations at major fire department conferences, and the FBI has invited an Arlington County assistant chief to make presentations at FBI terrorism conferences.

puter equipment. Also included are wireless laptop computers, video-conferencing capabilities, and a wireless remote-video camera that can send pictures back to the command vehicle or any remote location via satellite. System components, which cost \$171,000 before installation, are modularized and can be made to fit the department's specifications.

"There are aspects of this system that we're interested in exploring, but this package may not be the end-all for communications issues," says Schwartz. "Some of these capabilities may be available elsewhere."

Staffing changes

The report recommends that the Arlington County Fire Department review its fire apparatus-staffing levels to ensure the speed of early search-and-rescue operations and provide for the safety of the crew. Arlington Assistant Chief Schwartz says that the county has approved funding to staff all 10 fire department engines with four firefighters, following the requirements of NFPA 1710, *Organization and Deployment of Fire Suppression Operations, Emergency Medical Operations, and Special Operations to the Public by Career Fire Departments*, which requires a minimum crew of four firefighters for engines and ladder trucks. Previously, only seven engines had four-firefighter crews. The department is looking at staffing its heavy rescue vehicles with four firefighters in 2004 and the ladder trucks after that.

The department's haz-mat team is increasing from 33 members to 45, and the technical rescue team is growing from 30 to 42. The department is using NFPA 471, *Responding to Hazardous Materials Incidents*; NFPA 472, *Professional Competence of Responders to Hazardous Materials Incidents*; and NFPA 1006, *Rescue Technician Professional Qualifications*, as the training and certification standards for the new team members.

Full-time logistics captain

From a logistics perspective, Arlington County, like most jurisdictions, wasn't prepared for the magnitude and duration of the Pentagon operation.

"We were no different from most fire departments," Arlington County Fire Chief Ed Plaughter says. "Where do you get thousands of pairs of gloves?"

Today, the fire department has a full-time logistics captain and is storing equipment in an old library as it makes plans to build its own warehouse. The region's departments are currently formalizing a regional logistics team to accumulate the vast array of supplies Plaughter believes will equip the region for major incidents.

Finally, the after-action report notes deficiencies in hospital coordination that weren't simply equipment failures, but represent "flaws in the system." Because regional hospital disaster plans no longer required a clearinghouse hospital, emergency rooms in the area first learned of the Pentagon victims from EMS units bringing the victims in. The report recommends integrating all medical treatment facilities into a single EMS structure.

Arlington County and surrounding jurisdictions are following the report's recommendation to identify unique and critical facilities in their locales and to update emergency response plans for them. The report notes that, although the outside façades of government buildings typically remain unchanged, their interiors are modified frequently, necessitating an ongoing review of their emergency plans. In addition to the myriad government and military offices scattered throughout the region, Alexandria is the site of the federal courthouse where suspected terrorists are tried, and Fairfax County is home to CIA headquarters, as well as several water treatment plants.

Blueprint for fire departments nationwide

To produce the report, Titan Systems conducted 92 debriefing sessions, interviewed approximately 475 people, and extensively reviewed planning documents, mutual-aid agreements, journals, and logbooks during a six-month period. The resulting document summarizes the incident concisely, provides guidance on homeland defence, and focuses on building relationships and developing trust before an incident occurs. According to Chief Plaughter, it's a nonpolitical, independent, third-party review that's virtually unprecedented. (A month later, in August, New York City released a report by the consulting firm McKinsey & Company on the city's police and fire department responses to the World Trade Center attacks.)

"One critical element was having the com-

pany conduct up-front interviews in classic fire department critique format, without chief officers present," says Plaughter, who'd hoped from the outset that the report could serve as a blueprint for fire departments nationwide in responding to large-scale terrorist incidents. "I think the report gives you a context to judge your own situation, which is different for different communities. It says, 'Have you thought about these areas?'"

Arlington is breaking down each of the report's fire department recommendations into a statement, analyzing the statement to see how it relates to other recommendations, grouping like statements together, and deciding what to do with each group. Sometimes, action on a recommendation has already been taken. For example, the report recommends more reserve apparatus and equipment. Arlington's secured the additional apparatus and is now focusing on the equipment.

The Arlington County Fire Department has also placed each recommendation into a stand-alone work program that goes into an overall work plan to be reviewed quarterly by the county manager. While not all recommendations will be implemented, Plaughter says money isn't being used as a disqualifier. The department is using grant money and going through its standard budgeting process

Others Should Emulate:

- ICS and Unified Command
- Mutual Aid and Outside Support
- Arlington County Emergency Management Plan
- Employee Assistance Program
- Training, Exercises, and Shared Experiences

Challenges That Must Be Met:

- Self-Dispatching
- Fixed and Mobile Command and Control Facilities
- Communications
- Logistics
- Hospital Coordination



Clockwise, from top left: the mutual-aid response to the Pentagon 10 minutes after the plane crashed; the initial Arlington County command post; Metropolitan Washington Airports Authority (MWAA) Foam Unit 331 at the impact zone; MWAA fire officers and firefighters conferring after evacuating to Washington Boulevard; and MWAA and Arlington County firefighters after the impact-zone collapse.

to obtain necessary funds.

While sifting through all 111 recommendations can be daunting for any fire department, Plaughter says a good place to start is with the 10 important summary items near the beginning of the document. Under the heading “Capabilities Others Should Emulate,” the report describes five areas that worked very well and contributed significantly to the successful outcome of the incident (see previous page). A second category of five items, titled “Challenges That Must Be Met,” represents difficulties encountered during the course of the incident. These areas need to be corrected now or avoided in the future.

The Arlington fire chief admits that some parts of the report disappointed him.

“I’d envisioned more of a reliance upon the sequence of events to clearly portray the chronology of the incident,” Plaughter says. “Incidents of this magnitude . . . all have in common the timeline thread.”

For example, Plaughter says he’d like to have seen a schematic showing when specific elements should occur—three hours into the incident, scene security and credentialing should be in place, and so on—to illustrate what responders did fast enough and what took too long.

High marks

Overall, Arlington County garnered high marks for its incident command system (ICS) and unified command. The report praises Plaughter for his decision not to take command of the incident, something he says is common practice in the Washington metropolitan area.

“You really need to let the people who do it all the time—the assistant chiefs and battalion chiefs—do it, with your full faith and trust that they can command the incident,” Plaughter says. “I knew the talents of the individual in command.”

Instead of serving as the incident commander, Plaughter took on a coordinating role as planning chief, encompassing planning, safety, communications, logistics, and media issues. Because that concept worked so well at the Pentagon, Arlington is now designing a completely new regional ICS module for major incidents that incorporates both an incident commander and a planning chief who would work together. The concept is spreading to other arenas, too. George Washington University Hospital in Washington, D.C., is conducting a study to determine whether the concept can be used in the hospital setting during mass-casualty incidents.

“We didn’t know we were creating a new system at the time, but maybe we were,” Plaughter says.

The report also praises Arlington’s strong county emergency management plan for being well-thought-out, maintained, practiced, and implemented by government leaders and the county’s aggressive, well-established employee assistance program (EAP). EAP staff was at the Pentagon within three hours of the attack, proving “invaluable to first responders, their families, and the entire county support network.”

While the after-action report may not be headed for the best-seller list, the initial 500 print copies and CDs have been spoken for, and Arlington County is arranging to print an additional 1,000 copies to meet the demands of organizations hoping to benefit from the lessons learned at the Pentagon. The report can also be downloaded from the Arlington County Fire and Rescue Department website at www.co.arlington.va.us/fire/edu/about/pdf/after_report.pdf.

“I think this report will have more value when the next incident occurs and people look to this document and ask what’s been done,” Plaughter says. “We’re still too close to the incident to fully appreciate the value of this report right now.”