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Emergency workers stand on the front lines of peril

By Robert Davis
USA TODAY

As the nation winces at the threat of more terrorist attacks, and military troops gear up for a likely war, it's the civilian firefighters, paramedics and police who stand ready to respond within seconds of the next assault on the USA.

But as searchers in New York continue to sift through the rubble of the World Trade Center looking for hundreds of emergency workers who died answering calls for help, professional rescuers across the nation now wonder if they could face a similar fate responding to the work of terrorists.

These grass-roots troops — about 1 million across the nation — are sure to be drawn quickly into any future attack, and they may be among the next wave of casualties.

"I'm sure there are people here wondering, 'Why am I doing this? Is it safe to go into work today?' " says Daryl Louder, a battalion chief with the Fairfax County (Va.) Fire Department. Beginning moments after last week's attack, Fairfax crews worked around the clock at the Pentagon. First, the crews tended to survivors, and later they helped look for survivors.

Now the stakes are rising.

In the suburban Washington department and in other departments across the nation, rescuers are listening closely to national security experts who predict more attacks will follow.

Whatever terrorists dream up, these rescue workers must respond to it and assess it quickly — with life-and-death consequences.

Adding to the fear of rescuers is the knowledge that some of the biggest threats — such as biological warfare — could be invisible until it's too late.

"The problem with terrorism is, by the time you have a problem, you have a very serious problem," says Frank Hoffman, a former Marine who worked for the U.S. Commission on National Security for the 21st Century.

He points to a recent drill in Denver meant to test first responders' ability to handle a terrorist threat. The horrifying results: Unsuspecting rescuers spread the bubonic plague to thousands of others by taking it home first to their own families.



By Shannon Stapleton, Reuters

In the face of terrorism: First responders, shown here carrying an injured man from the World Trade Center, could be the first casualties in any future terrorist attacks.

But Hoffman says these local rescuers are still the nation's best defense. They communicate well with each other, and they work better in cities than the military.

"The state and local first responders possess enormous expertise," he says. "We need to build on that."

He says that as money is given to the military in coming weeks to prepare for war, some should go to the real front lines of the battle — the nation's emergency medical system.

First responders across the nation have made terrorism a higher priority after each attack on the USA.

They've tried to learn from the successes and the mistakes born of the chaotic responses to both the 1993 bombing of the World Trade Center and the 1995 bombing in Oklahoma City. But most of the efforts have taken hold only in major cities.

New York is considered one of the nation's best-prepared cities. After the 1993 World Trade Center bombing, New York's emergency response crews became some of the nation's experts.

They knew what steps to take to mitigate the damage. They knew what steps to take to protect themselves. But in last week's attack, the terrorists overwhelmed the rescuers. Now hundreds of first responders are gone.

There is little chance that other rescuers put in the same position could fare any better. One reason so many of them became victims is that so many people in the office buildings needed help.

Calls to 911 — even from frantic family members in other states — painted the grim picture of people trapped in the skies above the nation's largest city. Firefighters are trained to consider their own safety first, but with so many people in need of rescue, there was no hesitation as they rushed in to help.

"If the chance of survival is so low and the risk to us is so high, we won't commit ourselves," Louder says.

Firefighters stay out of unstable trenches, raging house fires and cabs of trucks that dangle from highway overpasses until they can assure their own survival. But those scenarios involve only a few victims. With thousands of people in need, rescuers have little choice.

"The larger the scale, the more people who are viable, the more risk we are willing to take," Louder says. "We are going to proceed at the highest level when there are people trapped on the 80th floor."

His department had learned to expect terrorism long before last week.

Fairfax routinely responds to bomb and chemical threats at federal agencies in nearby Washington that do everything from monitor spy satellites to track terrorists. And its medics found themselves thrust into a national security incident responding to a shooting in 1993: Two CIA employees had been slain and three others wounded outside the agency's gates.

Now, they work more like their counterparts in the Middle East, who rush in, grab victims and carry them to safety.

"It's a dangerous profession to begin with, but the problem with terrorism is you don't know what it's going to be," Louder says.

It's enough to make the average civil servant pause and reconsider the job's risks.

"People who might have been interested in the emergency service before this might be wondering if it's really worth it now," he says. "It has to be in the back of people's minds."

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