

"THE 9-11 COMMISSION: "Beyond our consciousness"

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THE REALITY OF 9-11 is now such that it's hard to remember the chaos of those first terrible moments when no one knew what was happening, much less why.

Consider this from a staff report released last week by the independent national commission investigating 9-11: Even as the North Tower of the World Trade Center was burning and United Flight 175 was streaking across New York Harbor toward the South Tower, building security officers still weren't sure they should evacuate the South Tower. The thought that another plane would hit the South Tower was "beyond our consciousness," one of them would say later.

Very little is beyond our consciousness now, which is why the commission spent three days last week near Ground Zero hearing testimony about the emergency response to the tragedy. About warnings that went unheeded and warnings that were never made. About turf battles between police and fire units. About firefighters who went into buildings that were doomed and couldn't hear when they were ordered out. About radios that didn't work and radios that couldn't be monitored. About 9-11 dispatchers who were, as one commissioner said, "clueless."

"The city's disaster-response plans were not worthy of the Boy Scouts, let alone this great city," said John F. Lehman, a Republican commission member.

That was Tuesday. On Wednesday, former New York Mayor Rudolph W. Giuliani downplayed trouble with coordination and communication. Mr. Giuliani seemed to regard the commission's work as undercutting the heroism of his police and fire departments.

With due respect to Mr. Giuliani, hundreds of individual accounts have verified the communications foul-ups. It does nothing to denigrate the firefighters who died to point out that some might have lived had their radios worked. What's important is to recognize that now we live in a world where epic man-made disasters are as likely as natural disasters and must make sure we're ready for both.

The key, the commission staff says, is communication.

Communication between governmental jurisdictions and a firm understanding of who is in command - as occurred after the Sept. 11, 2001, attack on the Pentagon, where established protocols put the Arlington County, Va., Fire Department in charge.

Communication among governmental entities - police, fire, EMS - and among those entities and medical institutions.

Better communication in a technical sense. The single greatest need is for sturdy, portable radios that provide "interoperable" communication between and among police officers, firefighters and other emergency personnel. This is as true in St. Louis as it is in New York, as true with an earthquake on the New Madrid fault as a terrorist attack.

Interoperable communications technology is a priority for the Department of Homeland Security, Secretary Tom Ridge told *Post-Dispatch* editors and writers Friday. "We're not going to mandate it, but we're going to set technical standards for the marketplace, so in a way we will be mandating."

Mr. Ridge said his department has "plenty of money" available for this technology, though most cities and states have chosen to spend the majority of their grant money on personnel and other projects. This will only compound the next disaster, when there will be lots of experts with exotic bomb-sniffing equipment and snappy uniforms who won't be able to talk to one another.

In St. Louis, crowded fire radio frequencies contributed to the deaths of two city firefighters two years ago. After the deaths of Derek Martin and Rob Morrison, civic leaders and political leaders here vowed to raise the money for an interoperable police and fire communications system. Deputy Chief Charles E. Coyle said very little money has come in.

At \$3,000 each, interoperable radios are not cheap. To equip every first responder in the city of St. Louis alone would cost \$7.2 million, and that doesn't begin to equip the approximately 10,000 other first responders throughout the metropolitan area.

In March, the city Fire Department was offered a \$372,000 grant from the Federal Emergency Management Agency to buy 56 interoperable radios for commanders and to make other communications upgrades. The grant was contingent on the department raising \$160,000. A volunteer group called the "Bucket Brigade" has been formed to raise funds. St. Louisans who want to do more for city firefighters than merely praise their bravery can call and leave a message for the Bucket Brigade at 314-259-2397 or 854-0802.