

VA's Involvement in the Aftermath of the 9/11 Attacks

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The photographs on the cover depict the tragic events of September 11, 2001. Along with many others, the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) responded to the horrific events that day at the World Trade Center in New York, at the Pentagon, and at the crash site in Pennsylvania.

On 9/11, Mr Bossert was attending a VA-sponsored conference in Albany, New York, on terrorism and how federal agencies would work together in response. As the first speaker took the podium, an image appeared behind him: Two tall office buildings hit by airplanes—a live news shot of the event that changed America forever. Beepers started going off throughout the audience. The speaker stated, “It’s not if, it’s when, and it’s now; ladies and gentlemen, it is time to go to work.”

In the first few hours after the attacks, staff at the VA New York Harbor Healthcare System’s Manhattan campus, the closest to Ground Zero, stood outside the emergency department entrance to flag down approaching ambulances. Staff also took to the streets looking for wounded among those fleeing the dust and debris. When the New York National Guard activated troops to help with the recovery, Guard commanders asked VA to serve as their primary source of medical care.

VA had long worked to establish relationships with federal, state, and local partners in NY, and throughout the nation. Today, we work in a world much changed. Lessons learned from 9/11 have been tested in response to domestic and international events. The basic premise from that conference—that it is better to know your neighbor before the disaster than to attempt to establish a relationship during the event—remains. That premise has been the focus of VA’s subsequent efforts.

Two VA facilities have been named after veterans who died on 9/11. The Victor J. Saracini clinic was named for the Captain of United Airlines Flight 175, the second plane to crash into the World Trade Center. The Max J. Beilke clinic was named after the last soldier to leave Saigon during the Vietnam War; he died when American Airlines Flight 77 crashed into the Pentagon.

Cover photo credits: Upper left (rescue dog at Ground Zero), upper right (rescue workers at Ground Zero), middle right (wide view of Ground Zero), and lower right (World Trade Center ruins), Andrea Booher/FEMA News; bottom middle (Pennsylvania crash site), AP Photo by Gene J. Puskar; bottom left, Department of Defense photo by Tech Sgt Cedric H. Rudisill.

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