



UNIVERSITY OF PITTSBURGH
INSTITUTE OF POLITICS

case in point

FLIGHT 93: Policy Considerations
for Emergency Preparedness
in Pennsylvania

NOVEMBER 2005



Across the nation, considerable energy and attention have been directed at bioterrorism preparedness and planning, and considerable progress has been made in some critical health-related emergency planning and response areas. However, there is evidence that certain areas of preparedness may be incomplete across the various governmental agencies holding responsibility for emergency response in many states.

Last year, the University of Pittsburgh's Institute of Politics and Graduate School of Public Health's Center for Public Health Practice set out to develop a series of activities that would begin to address the legal and administrative "disconnects" in Pennsylvania's emergency response infrastructure. The overall purpose of this initiative has been the engagement of knowledgeable professionals with relevant public sector emergency response responsibilities in a process that can illuminate how the legal infrastructure supports and responds to health related emergencies in Pennsylvania.

Participants were asked to review and respond to a fictional scenario depicting a slowly developing public health emergency with potential to severely impact functional capacities. Clarke Thomas, retired senior editor of the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* and consultant to the Institute of Politics, interviewed respondents to ascertain their respective responsibilities associated with such an event and discuss what they identified as disconnects in governmental powers, civil liberties issues, inter- and intra-agency communication, and the role of the media and communication with the public.

Following the initial interviews, respondents participated in a roundtable discussion to collectively review the issues presented in the scenario and to define the protective and response actions needed across sectors to improve the Pennsylvania emergency response legal and policy infrastructure.

Thomas compiled the interviewees' comments, analysis of those comments, and delineation of the policy disconnects for an Institute of Politics STATUS REPORT on Pennsylvania's preparedness level. That document served as the foundation for a July 8 Pittsburgh forum during which the Institute of Politics and the Center for Public Health Practice convened knowledgeable professionals with relevant public sector responsibilities to discuss policy ideas and options on emergency preparedness that can be considered by state policy makers. The outcomes of the July 8 meeting are also available in the Institute's REPORT.

On July 7, terrorists attacked the London subway system. That catastrophe only reaffirmed for those attending the Institute of Politics seminar the difficulties of preparing for such an event. In the words of Pamela Tokar-Ickes, a member of the Somerset County Board of Commissioners that had to deal with the terrorist-caused crash of United Airlines Flight 93 on September 11, 2001: "When a real crisis occurs, it's too late for planning, discussion, and all that. You just do it." Commissioner Tokar-Ickes' first hand experience and passion gave her words and ideas an added level of authority to the audience members.

This Case in Point—the first issue of a new Institute of Politics publication that will contain snapshots of various Commonwealth policy issues and pivotal events—contains a reproduction of Commissioner Tokar-Ickes' remarks at the July 8 forum. It is our hope that this publication and Commissioner Tokar-Ickes' policy suggestions and insights will serve to inform the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania as it moves toward a more secure future.



THIS IS THE TEXT OF A SPEECH GIVEN ON JULY 8, 2005, BY SOMERSET COUNTY COMMISSIONER PAMELA TOKAR-ICKES. SHE DELIVERED THE ADDRESS AT THE UNIVERSITY OF PITTSBURGH INSTITUTE OF POLITICS FORUM TITLED PREPAREDNESS FOR HEALTH EMERGENCIES: IMPLICATIONS FOR PUBLIC POLICY.

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Good morning. I have the unenviable position of serving as the last speaker on this morning's agenda. All of these presenters are a tough act to follow, so I hope your expectations aren't too high as I bat "cleanup."

I am not an expert, so my reaction after listening to the presentations today is that clearly we have a lot of work to do in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. But we have some good teachers to learn from, and some very dedicated state and federal officials and agencies to drive this critical agenda.

As a local elected official who had a firsthand taste of what it means to be in a position of public responsibility in the midst of a crisis, I truly hope that we can turn this exercise into a viable policy initiative that will receive the careful study and diligent action this subject deserves. I can tell you from experience, as can several other individuals in this room today, that when the real crisis occurs—and don't think it can't or won't happen to you—when that real crisis occurs in your community, be it weather related, terrorism incited, or anything that threatens public health, safety, or welfare, it will be too late for policy, protocol, and procedure development. You will immediately be thrust into a "just do it" mode.

If you are a local elected official, especially at the county level where both the coordination and delivery of emergency response occurs, you will find yourself in a very unique position. You will be governed by the protocol and procedures of many agencies, both federal and state, as well as be forced to balance the interrelationships between county offices that

charged with various duties and responsibilities under the law. And you will be expected to simultaneously conduct yourself in a professional, responsible, and cool-headed manner that conveys the seriousness of the issue, while at the same time instills public confidence.

That is not an easy role, in light of the fact that there is likely a very confused and constantly evolving set of circumstances with which you are dealing. And when you dovetail the resulting media crush and competing agency priorities, and yes, unfortunately, egos, it is a delicate balancing act.

We in Somerset County were very fortunate because, overall, we did what we had to do, we didn't make too many mistakes, and we forged ahead. We had no preparation, we had no model, and we had no protocol. But we did have the luxury of something that no one in this room will ever have again, and that is the luxury of the pre-9/11 mindset.

We didn't think of the worst-case scenario because we didn't seriously think it could or would happen, or even know what the worst-case scenario was. We thought we were dealing with a plane crash—bad enough—but when you factor in the 9/11 circumstances, it was much, much worse. It immediately became a crime scene, a law enforcement jurisdiction, a recovery and clean-up operation, and a national tragedy.

When I think back to the morning of September 11 and how we were reacting in horror to the occurrences in New York and Washington, I could barely fathom that

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a plane had crashed in Somerset County, let alone see its connection to the other two events or international terrorism. In fact, from seconds after impact when we all went into reaction mode, until 2:30 that afternoon as I stood overlooking the crash site from what would become the operations center for the FBI, I completely forgot about the other two sites.

And yet, as bad as our situation was, it could have been much worse. I look back now and I see things that I didn't see in the hours and days following the crash.

I am haunted by the image of local volunteer firemen and our sheriff's deputies standing in the middle of the debris field. I remember watching the preparations for the decontamination process at the makeshift incident command center, a process that was mainly being done because of biological agents resulting from the crash. It was not until later, in addition to the plane crashing into a field, that we realized what could have been on that plane. And there they were, our local first responders, standing right in the middle of it. I will leave it to the bioterrorism experts in this room to draw their own conclusions of just how naïve we were.

But that pure, unadulterated ignorance is something we will never likely experience again because we are engaged in exercises like these and preparations that hopefully will prepare us for the scenarios that we all pray never occur. 9/11 was definitely a wake-up call for us in Somerset County and for many counties in Southwestern Pennsylvania. Because we know now

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that it can happen here, that we don't necessarily have to be a target, and that many of us do have high-value targets in our backyards. And so, for local elected officials, it's a challenge for which they must be prepared. And if I can leave you with just a few thoughts from my perspective they would be the following:

Just as we must understand the roles that you play and the responsibilities that you all have—and I speak on behalf of my fellow commissioners statewide—please respect the position that counties and their respective agencies are in from the second a crisis occurs. We know our communities; they have expectations of us, and we have a responsibility to them. And there is a difference in the responsibilities that you have to our constituents for this simple reason—we are there before, during, and long after you have come and gone.

We will provide the first responders, the communications system, and very likely many of the financial resources that you will need to conduct your work. We need you to educate us, communicate with us, and work in partnership with us to accomplish what we all need to accomplish and what we all need to do for the health and safety of our residents. From our experience in Somerset County and my reaction to our scenario and the presentations this morning, there are still disconnects in the system, and we need to work together to create vital linkages between us.

For instance, I had always assumed that in the event of a major plane crash, there was some type of national "go team" that rolled in and handled it all. You can

imagine the Board of Commissioners' sense of numbness when PEMA's (Pennsylvania Emergency Management Agency) representatives kindly took us aside and gently prepared us for the fact that Somerset County would have to front the cost of the cleanup operation, and that we might not be fully reimbursed. They were right. You name it, we ordered it, we picked it up, we delivered it to the site and we paid for it—\$287,000 worth of stuff and services, and county overtime, and in the end we are still owed about \$64,000, which we probably will never see because United Airlines declared bankruptcy.

In the end, the residents of Somerset County—our general fund—picked up the \$64,000 leftover tab on the unreimbursed expenses from an act of international terrorism, and served as the financing arm for federal, state, and other agency operations at the crash site. This should never occur.

We need to assure local governments, who are struggling with their own daily fiscal responsibilities, that in the event they find themselves in the middle of a public health crisis or incident of terrorism, which could be concurrent, there will be funding available up front, not reimbursed, or they will be made whole.

It was our Emergency Management Agency and other county staff who were handling the purchasing and all necessary arrangements that had to be made. It was our coroner's office that served as the lead agency at the crash site. And it was our administrative staff who were responsible for tracking and seeking reimbursement.

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And I will tell you, Flight 93 brought Somerset County government to a standstill for several weeks. The day-to-day responsibilities of government went on, but top officials and many offices and agencies did little else but respond to the task at hand and its many facets.

We need funding to improve our communications systems that are so desperately lacking in the field. Our first responders are likely going to be on the front lines once again, and in many cases, they can't talk to one another, let alone to a neighboring county or other agency officials who need to be in communication with those on the ground. We need to take a close look at the available communications infrastructure, especially in rural Pennsylvania, and look for ways to make funding—even partial funding—available to counties on a regional level for needed upgrades.

Currently Somerset, Greene, and Fayette Counties are talking about changing to an 800 megahertz system. But, we have been told by top federal officials there isn't enough money to make those upgrades. And we have been told by our local volunteer emergency responders and municipalities they don't have the money to pay to interface with an upgraded system, even if we could afford it, so financial resources have to be made available to them as well.

And finally, we need to interface better with the incident command structure and establish a public communications protocol so that when a crisis occurs, there is a better relationship with all federal, state, and

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local entities involved, and a single voice—or at least a few voices—designated to communicate on behalf of those agencies and with local elected officials.

We can play by the rules, but we need to be included in the process, and we need to have direct access to agency representatives who are decision makers on the scene. We know you are communicating with our Emergency Management Agency officials, but you also need to talk to us. We have a huge public responsibility, as do you, and we need to have accurate, up-to-date information unfiltered through others, so that we can understand what is happening and how and what we can communicate to our communities in a responsible way. This could be accomplished by the development of a public official's protocol. We are not emergency responders, or health experts, or terrorism analysts, or law enforcement officials. But we are likely good communicators and know how to communicate with our constituents.

Educate and train us. Use our County Commissioners Association of Pennsylvania and others to reach us and I assure you that with the emphasis on and concern about public health and safety today, we will be up to the task. So will our judges and district attorneys and anyone else who may be called into handling a public health situation and all of its incumbent issues at the local level.

In closing, one of the best suggestions I have heard today is the rebuilding of our public health infrastructure. In Somerset County, our state health department is



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understaffed and, as a result, underutilized. Every commissioner in this room will probably agree, that we are understaffed and, as a result, underutilized. Every commissioner in this room will probably agree, that we would be much better served with a few less fancy pieces of equipment stored in garages and with more public health officials, because in rural Pennsylvania the best “equipment” that can respond to an incident of bioterrorism is not a Bobcat with track wheels, it’s a nurse or a doctor. Our public health system in rural counties in many cases is a staff of one or two, not enough for day-to-day activities let alone a crisis.

I would like to thank all of you for your expertise and insights today. It is comforting to know that you are all there for the County of Somerset and other local elected officials with your expertise and your abilities, especially in a time of crisis. I am sure we would all like to not have to analyze these potential scenarios, but just turn on the news and you see every day that we live in a very, very different world.

And thank you to the University of Pittsburgh’s Institute of Politics for focusing our attention on this very serious and timely issue. I know we all will look forward to the resulting recommendations from this very good work.



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The University of Pittsburgh is an affirmative action, equal opportunity institution. Published in cooperation with the Department of University Marketing Communications. UMC5457-1105



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