

“We’re facing hazards never seen before, and we have no textbook on how to handle these hazards,” says Mendelson. He cited the use of cranes lifting steel beams of unknown weight, slings breaking under unexpectedly heavy loads, removal of debris while underground fires continue to burn, and the instability of nearby buildings as just some of the safety problems at the site.

Another 35 staffers from OSHA’s other three East Coast regions arrived to augment the enormous undertaking. Each week, a new group of OSHA staff from all over the country is arriving in New York for a 5-day stint to help out.

At the Pentagon, a three-person Federal OSHA team served in a largely advisory role, overseeing emergency response and helping identify appropriate respiratory protection for emergency workers. Tom Pope, director of the Norfolk Area Office, says the team worked side-by-side with the military, the EPA, and the FBI to ensure worker safety and health during rescue and recovery operations.

“The site was very different from the one in New York in that it involved a much more controlled area with one employer, the U.S. government, one building, and much less damage,” Pope says. “Everyone worked together in a positive way and as a result, there were minimal injuries and no serious injuries among the response workers in the whole process.”

OSHA’s non-stop work has been an integral part of the rescue and recovery operations. When workers on the pile cheer at the site of people wearing green jackets with OSHA across the back, the agency knows it is making a difference. [JSHQ](#)

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## An OSHA Office Evacuates

by Donna Miles

It was a perfect New York City morning, and Mike Mabee was just starting his day as a whistleblower investigator at OSHA’s Manhattan Area Office. The office was on the top floor of the World Trade Center’s Building 6, an 8-story building in a complex dominated by two 110-story skyscrapers.

Sipping coffee and sorting through his case files, Mabee heard what sounded like a sonic boom. His office lights flickered, then he heard someone in the distance yelling that something had hit Tower 1, one of the skyscrapers. Glass, paper, metal, and other debris was falling from the sky past his windows, and Mabee heard the pounding of more debris hitting his building’s roof.

The staff hurried toward the stairwell, just as they had trained to do during past fire drills. The office’s emergency action plan called for the staff to go down the steps to the ground floor and to rally on the east side of the building.

Mabee, Victor Couverter, a safety and health clerk, and Lou Willard, a retired OSHA employee who was visiting the office, went into immediate action and evacuated a fellow employee who had just returned to work following a stroke. Frank Ufert, a compliance assistance specialist, was temporarily wheelchair-bound. As larger and larger pieces of debris pounded on their building roof, Mabee, Couverter, Willard, and Ufert followed the previously planned and rehearsed part of the emergency action plan specifically related to evacuating someone in a wheelchair and rode the freight elevator to the building’s basement. “The plan had already been made to use the elevator, if possible, to evacuate our wheelchair-bound colleague,” said Mabee. “It’s



Hundreds of rescue workers and firefighters sift through rubble near the building that once housed OSHA’s Manhattan Area Office. FEMA photo by Michael Rieger

conceivable that had we taken the extra time to walk down eight floors, we may not have made it down in time. Sticking to the plan and using the elevator is probably what saved us.”

In the basement, the three ran through the parking garage, pushing Ufert and his wheelchair toward the exit. New York Port Authority officers inside the garage, however, stopped them from leaving the building for fear they would be hit by falling debris. “I don’t know how long we waited in the garage before they let us leave,” said Mabee, “but it felt like a long time.”

Finally, the four were permitted to leave, and they hurried toward the north, away from the complex. “At that point, I didn’t know what had happened,” said Mabee. “I thought it was just an accident, maybe a fire or a gas explosion.” Yet, as he looked up at the burning building with a gaping hole near the top floors, Mabee watched a commercial airliner bank sharply and head straight into the second tower. “As soon as I saw the second plane, I understood what had happened,” Mabee said. “It was obvious that the plane had deliberately steered into the tower.”

At that point, Mabee said the street turned into “complete pandemonium” as “everyone started fleeing.” Fire, police, and emergency medical personnel started arriving at the scene. Looking up, Mabee saw at least 20 people jump to their deaths. “It got to the point where you just couldn’t watch it anymore,” he said.

Mabee and his colleagues continued rushing north, away from the scene, when Tower 2 crashed to the ground, sending what he called “a huge wash of debris” over the site and burying many of the newly arrived police and fire vehicles. “I could see that a whole mass of the first responders had

*OSHA’s Manhattan Area Office was based in the top floor of the World Trade Center’s Building 6, pictured, before the attack. OSHA photo by Kevin Brennan*



been killed,” Mabee said. As he and his colleagues proceeded away from the scene, they watched Tower 1, the building that had been hit by the first hijacker, pancake down to the ground. What he didn’t realize at the time was that Tower 1’s collapse had completely destroyed the OSHA Area Office in Building 6.

Mabee and his three co-workers finally arrived at the OSHA Region II Office in the Federal

Building about a mile and a half north of the World Trade Center complex, only to find that the staff had evacuated. Fortunately, they found a staff member from the office who pointed them toward the office’s rally point about 2 blocks away, at James Walker Park. There, Mabee, Couvertier, Willard, and Ufert found their colleagues from the area office, including Area Office Director Richard Mendelson, who had been out of the office giving a presentation in Queens when the incident occurred. All 23 members of the Manhattan Area Office had escaped the disaster unharmed. “That was the first time that we all realized that everyone else was okay,” said Mabee.

Standing at the park, looking toward the dust clouds to the south and listening to the news on a radio, Mabee heard a call go out for volunteers with medical training. A trained paramedic, he rushed back to the World Trade Center complex—now referred to by the media as “ground zero”—and helped set up a makeshift hospital in the gym of Manhattan Community College. Doctors, nurses, and medical students started arriving at



*Mike Mabee and his coworkers in OSHA’s Manhattan Area Office escaped without injury.*

*OSHA photo by Susan Fleming*



Wreckage litters streets surrounding the site. FEMA photo by Michael Rieger

## Planning for Emergencies

by Donna Miles

Without warning, an explosion at a Lower Michigan mill that produces particle board blew out sections of the building walls and sent plumes of fire skyward. Forty-five employees, nine of them injured in the blast, had to evacuate the burning structure. The plant manager described the incident as his “worst nightmare.”

Nobody expects an emergency or disaster, especially one that affects them, their employees, and their business directly. Yet workplace emergencies—explosions, fires, floods, tornadoes, chemical spills, toxic gas releases, or even terrorist attacks like the recent ones on the World Trade Center and Pentagon—and can strike anyone, anytime, and anywhere. Businesses too often find themselves forced to evacuate when they least expect it.

The recent terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon have brought the possibility of such events to the forefront of everyone’s mind. OSHA’s emergency action plan

No company expects a workplace emergency, but if one occurs, advanced planning can reduce uncertainty and save lives.

the site, and Mabee was put in charge of supplies that poured in from area hospitals. By nightfall, when the building lights wouldn’t go on, Mabee helped pack up the operation and move it two blocks away to Stuyvesant High School to continue offering aid, mostly to rescue workers.

“The rescuers were so focused on their work that they didn’t want to leave the scene for treatment,” Mabee said. “The dust was so thick that they needed to flush their eyes so they could see, but we couldn’t get them to come in to have it done.” In response, Mabee and teams of medics started carrying intravenous solution bags filled with saline solution out to the street to flush the eyes of more than 100 rescue workers. They worked until 6 o’clock the next morning before more volunteers relieved them.

Now, Mabee is back on the job, working out of OSHA’s Region II Office. Getting back to his investigations, he admits, is difficult. His building is destroyed, along with all his files. His email is down. He doesn’t even have a permanent desk from which to work. “I’m trying to reconstruct where everything was before September 11,” he said.

What did the disaster teach him about emergency evacuations? “One of the lessons I learned is that just getting out of the building is

not enough. You have to get away from the building,” he said. “By the same token, you need two rally points: a regular one and a secondary one. If everyone from our office had remained at the regular rally point, they would have been killed by all the falling debris.”

Mendelson agreed that having a preplanned rally point was a big factor in his office’s ability to account for its people as quickly as possible. He remembered all too well an incident several years ago in Manhattan in which three firefighters and rescue workers received severe burns searching a ConEdison building for workers who had already evacuated. “By having a good plan in which people know what to do and where to go in an emergency,” he says, “people can respond more quickly, potentially saving their own lives as well as those first responders who might risk theirs trying to save them.”

Mabee says the disaster will forever change his attitude toward emergency evacuation drills. “I always used to think they were a pain. You’d be sitting there in the middle of a project or typing up something and have to stop and leave the building. It always felt like a major inconvenience,” he said. “But now I know differently. Now I know that it can help save your life.” JSHQ