



U.S. EQUAL EMPLOYMENT OPPORTUNITY COMMISSION
Washington, D.C. 20507

Office of the Chair

September 11, 2011

Dear EEOC Colleagues:

Ten years ago, like so many people across the United States and the globe, I was shocked and sickened to witness the destructive force of the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center in New York City and the Pentagon in Northern Virginia, and the fatal crash in Shanksville, Pennsylvania of an airplane en route to an unknown target in Washington, DC. The images of danger and suffering associated with September 11, 2001 are an indelible part of our national memory. As the nation solemnly observes the 10th anniversary of the 9/11 attacks, many of us will pause to honor the memories of the victims of this senseless violence and convey condolences to their surviving family members and friends. And of course, the selflessness and bravery of those who risked their own health and safety in order to help others during the attacks must never be forgotten.

I also believe, however, that it is important to remember that countless acts of compassion and courage followed closely behind this unprecedented tragedy, and ultimately helped to restore to survivors and witnesses a measure of faith that we would somehow, someday recover from the grief and loss that we experienced collectively on September 11th. In that spirit, I am taking this opportunity to recall the extraordinary resilience and fortitude of the EEOC employees who worked in offices located near the sites of the attacks, and the compassionate and swift response of EEOC staff across the country who mobilized to support their colleagues in the wake of 9/11.

As many of you know, but those who have come to the EEOC in the past decade may not, in 2001 the EEOC's New York District Office was located on the 18th floor of building 7 of the World Trade Center complex, only a few hundred yards from the Center's twin towers. Thanks to the skill and courage of the evacuation team, our employees were safely evacuated from 7 World Trade Center. However, shortly after they made it out of the building, many witnessed firsthand the total destruction of the towers that stood directly across from their offices. While there were, thankfully, no physical injuries or deaths among our staff, Philadelphia District Office Director Spencer Lewis, who was then serving as Director of the New York District Office, said that the "emotional toll [wa]s unimaginable." In our Washington, D.C. offices, all employees were safely evacuated after the Pentagon was hit. However, reported threats that other government buildings -- including the White House and Capitol -- were slated for attack kept anxiety high in Washington for the entire day, and indeed for a long period after September 11th.

On the afternoon of September 11th, several hours after the collapse of the towers, 7 World Trade Center, the home of our New York District Office, also collapsed. Our employees' personal effects and all of the agency's files, ork products and equipment were completely destroyed in the collapse. Incredibly, New York City firefighter John Misha later recovered the agency seal from rubble at the scene of the collapse. The recovered seal remains on display today -- battered, yet miraculously intact -- in the entry to the New York District Office.

In spite of the catastrophic losses suffered in New York, within days of the attacks, EEOC began the painstaking work of reconstructing files and reproducing the work product that was buried under the rubble of 7 World Trade Center. Significantly, many offices and staff across the country pitched in to ease and expedite the recovery effort. Intake calls were re-routed to Boston, Massachusetts; temporary offices were housed in Newark, New Jersey; "care packages" were sent from employees in Houston, Texas to their colleagues in New York; and to buoy depressed spirits, EEOC staff across the country sent supportive messages and placed calls to the New York District Office staff.

The remarkable pace of the restoration of normal operations is memorialized in agency press releases: on September 12, 2001 an EEOC press release announced, "EEOC New York Office Destroyed in Terrorist Attack on

World Trade Center”; only 16 days after the attacks, the agency announced that the New York District Office would resume partial operations the following week; and a little more than a month after the attacks, the press was informed that the EEOC “re-opened for business at a temporary Manhattan location, restoring essential agency services to residents of the New York area.” None of this would have been possible without the concerted effort and tireless support of many members of our staff and the commitment of Chair Cari M. Dominguez to the swift and complete restoration of the New York District Office’s operations after 9/11.

On this occasion, I believe that it is also fitting to recall how quickly and effectively EEOC employees addressed novel workplace discrimination issues that arose in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, and to consider the continuing significance of that work to the agency and the Nation. While the terrorist attacks inspired countless acts of heroism and goodwill throughout our nation, unfortunately, many religious, ethnic, and national origin minorities became the victims of pernicious discrimination in the workplace. In the initial months after the attacks, the EEOC saw a 250 percent increase in the number of religion-based discrimination charges involving Muslims and persons of Middle Eastern descent.

Responding quickly, the EEOC began a targeted outreach campaign aimed at educating employers, civil rights organizations, and members of religious groups on employee and employer rights and responsibilities under the law and how to prevent religious and national origin discrimination in the aftermath of 9/11. Within days of the terrorist attacks, Chair Dominguez issued a press release “call[ing] on all employers and employees across the country to promote tolerance and guard against unlawful workplace discrimination based on national origin or religion.” The Commission also held a [public meeting in December 2001](#) on 9/11 backlash discrimination and best practices to prevent and address this type of discrimination in the workplace.

Today, despite the best efforts of the EEOC and many enforcement partners, we continue to see more charges involving [religious discrimination](#) and [national origin discrimination](#) against Muslims and people who are or are perceived to be from Middle Eastern nations. As a result, in addition to our general outreach and education efforts to ensure the Nation’s laws prohibiting employment discrimination on the basis of religion and national origin are vigorously enforced, the EEOC has continued to work closely with stakeholders most affected by backlash discrimination to ensure that both employees and employers are aware of their rights and responsibilities.

Looking toward the future, I have asked Commissioner Ishimaru to lead a task force to examine immigration related employment issues. This group will evaluate and make recommendations to improve EEOC’s and the federal government’s accessibility to immigrant communities and more effectively coordinate our enforcement, litigation, outreach and education efforts related to national origin discrimination.

In observance of the 9/11 Anniversary, I have asked the Office of Communications and Legislative Affairs (OCLA) to release a public statement on EEOC’s enforcement activities post-9/11 and re-release a statement by Spencer H. Lewis, Former Director of the New York District office entitled, “The Impact of September 11, 2001: New York’s Experience.” Both are referenced in this statement, but I encourage you to read them in their entirety on our [website page dedicated to 9/11](#).

Throughout this week, in your homes, places of worship, offices, and neighborhoods, you may observe a moment of silence, participate in memorial services, or otherwise take a break from your daily routine to remember the victims and express support for the survivors of 9/11. As you do so, please reserve a special moment in your thoughts and prayers for your colleagues in the EEOC whose lives were changed forever by what they witnessed and experienced ten years ago today. Finally, I hope that you will join me in honoring the exemplary manner in which the EEOC responded to one of the most difficult periods in the history of the agency and the nation.

Sincerely and with deepest gratitude,

Jacqueline A. Berrien
Chair