

## The Power of Public Service

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Though it's been ten years, we remember well the tragic events of September 11, 2001. As we look back on that day, we recognize that we initially went through a period of disbelief, unable to process and accept what we were seeing over and over on the television screen. The scenes were baffling at first and though we found ourselves watching them repeatedly, we didn't really comprehend what was happening. Later in the day, the tragedy began to become more personal - names and faces began to replace the surreal images that seemed almost impossible in their horror. As that happened, grief and sorrow for the people whose lives were ended in a fury of violence and hatred began to well up inside. We cried.

As these scenes became more personal to us, we also began to think about the many who reached out to their fellow citizens, especially the thousands of public servants who walked and ran toward the unimaginable to help. A most enduring image for us is the story told by several of those struggling down the stairs of the World Trade Center to escape death. "As we were trying to get down, we met police officers and fire fighters going up – and we clapped and cheered. Now we know that those same brave souls almost surely perished in the collapse of the building."

As hard as it is to understand planes flying into buildings, it's also hard to understand the motives of these courageous men and women, who literally walked through fire to try to save and protect the lives of others. Some of them died. Some were badly hurt. Even those who were not physically damaged were injured in way that

is fundamentally different from the injuries suffered by those of us who watched from the safe distance of a television newscast. Although many of us would like to think that their uniforms and training somehow protected them from all the terror, pain, and horror that we would feel, it did not. It prepared them, but it didn't shield them.

In the end, they are human just like us. While their uniforms and equipment may partially obscure their individuality, each of them has a name and a story. Each has families, friends, dreams, fears. They love and laugh, work and play, talk and walk just like us. They are every bit as vulnerable as we are.

Yet, on September 11, these people showed America, once again, that they stand apart. What makes them different is their quiet, often anonymous heroism. They are public servants. They serve their fellow citizens in a way that many people would find very difficult if not impossible to understand. How could they be so courageous? So selfless? How can we understand their heroism? The answer to these questions goes to the very soul of the public service. Yes, it was their job. Yes, they were trained. Yes, they were well equipped physically and mentally for the tasks they had to perform. But that does not diminish the nobility, the honor, or the sacrifice of their actions. Nor should it detract from our gratitude and our respect.

In a peculiar way, this ghastly act of terrorism reminds us of why we are in the public service. We care about our country, our community, and our neighbors. Each of us, whether we wear a uniform, a suit, a jacket, coveralls, or a hard hat, plays a role in improving the lives of others. Service to the public - helping people in trouble, making the world safer and cleaner, helping children learn and prosper, literally going where others would not go - is our job and our calling.

The image of police officers and firefighters going up those stairs is compelling. But even more compelling is the larger and more pervasive power of public service. Those in law enforcement, in transportation, in health care, and in dozens of other fields at the federal, state, and local level have made untold sacrifices over the months and years following September 11 in order to respond to these events and to make this world a better place for our citizens. This ability to be selfless, to be open to the needs and values and wants of others, is a part of each public servant. And it's a part of who we are that shouldn't require effort, or even tragedy for us to recognize or acknowledge. We need not wait for such events to awaken our sense of humanity and respect. As these events have once again shown, service to the public is indeed a proud and noble profession.

(The original version of this commentary was published in September of 2001 by the American Society for Public Administration.)