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25 YEARS LATER

SEPTEMBER 11, 2001 — SEPTEMBER 11, 2026

How Prepared are We?



Twenty-Five Years Later

Reflections and Progress

Dear Esteemed Colleagues,

Twenty-five years after September 11, I still measure much of my professional life from the time I spent on World Trade Center recovery operations. Days after the attacks, I deployed to New York City to help support the the unglamorous, but essential work of documenting damage, assembling eligible costs, and moving recovery dollars to the governments and organizations that had to rebuild. The scale of the loss was unlike anything our generation of emergency managers had been asked to hold. What I remember most clearly, though, is not only the destruction. It is the people I had the great pleasure of working beside, and the honor of supporting the recovery efforts of New York City, the Port Authority, the State of New York, and a countless number of public agencies and nonprofit organizations.

That experience did not just confirm that emergency management matters. Together with the scores of other disasters across a 30-year career, it convinced me that the work is too important to be left to instinct and institutional memory alone. We have to critique and improve what we do through systematic and methodical processes, generating new understanding, validating what we think we already know, and solving the next set of problems the profession will face. That is why I pursued the research side of this discipline as seriously as the operational side.

Ten years after the attacks, I had the opportunity to be involved with a national survey of public service and public safety professionals asked the people closest to the mission whether the country was actually better prepared. This issue returns to this question.

Research will not replace judgment on the worst day. It can, however, keep us honest between those days. It can tell us where collaboration improved and where funding, staffing, and household readiness did not. It can keep the people I met in Lower Manhattan, and the communities we have served since, from becoming only a story we tell in September. If this profession is going to be worthy of the work we ask of it, we have to keep contributing evidence to the practice, not only commentary after the fact. I hope the pages that follow are useful to that end.

Sincerely,

Dr. Daniel Martin, CEM

Managing Principal

Integrated Solutions Consulting



Dr. Daniel Martin, CEM

Dan has more than 30 years of experience working with local, state, and federal governments, and has been involved in all aspects of emergency management. Dr. Martin was one of the world's first to hold a PhD in Emergency Management.

How Prepared Are We Since 9/11?

What Later Research Suggest at the 25 Year Mark

Triangulating Studies to Understand National Readiness, Collaboration, Funding, Political Attention, and Threat Perception Since 9/11

Twenty-five years after the attacks of September 11, 2001, emergency management still lives with a question the profession asked out loud at the tenth anniversary: are we actually prepared? In 2011, Capella University fielded a national online survey of 1,055 public service and public safety professionals to hear from the people who would manage, respond to, and recover from the next crisis. Integrated Solutions Consulting was involved in that work through the Comprehensive Emergency Management Research Foundation (CEMR Foundation), which served as a named research partner alongside the American Public Health Association, the American Society for Public Administration, the FBI National Academy Associates, and the U.S. Council of the International Association of Emergency Managers. The study was not a probability sample of every first responder in the country. It was something rarer at the time: a large, practitioner-facing snapshot of how the people closest to the mission judged the decade after 9/11.

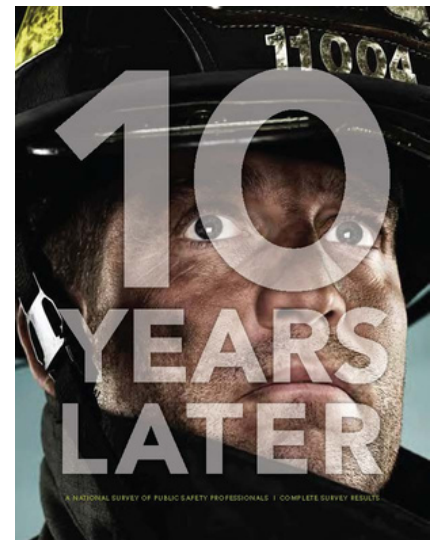
Fielded from July 15 to August 17, 2011, and later briefed at an Emergency Management Summit in New York City, the survey asked three core questions. How prepared was the nation for a terrorist attack, natural disaster, or other large-scale emergency? What had changed since September 11? And how well did agencies, governments, and professions collaborate? Respondents were a mixed front line. Emergency preparedness and emergency management staff made up the largest share, joined by local and state officials, fire and law enforcement personnel, public health professionals, healthcare administrators, and others across every region of the country. Capella was careful to note the volunteer nature of the sample. That caveat still matters. The value of the study was never that it could stand in for a census. It was that it captured, in the profession's own words, a split verdict that has aged with uncomfortable accuracy.

The 2011 findings were encouraging and uneasy at the same time. Seventy-one percent believed the United States was better prepared for a terrorist attack than it had been before September 11; 56 percent said the country was better prepared for a natural disaster than before Hurricane Katrina. Collaboration was the clearest success story: 92 percent said collaboration in the emergency preparedness community had improved, and 88 percent said the same of work among federal, state, and local governments. Training was the strongest specific gain, with 70 percent reporting improvement. Then came the reservations. Sixty-nine percent were worried about another major terrorist attack. Two-thirds said federal and state leaders were not giving preparedness enough attention; 64 percent said the same of local officials. Eighty-eight percent believed funds were allocated according to what was best for politicians, not preparedness. Fifty-eight percent had already seen budgets fall over the prior two years, 61 percent expected another cut the next year, and 40 percent expected fewer staff within five years. The study's own summary still reads like a briefing note for 2026: better prepared than in 2001, with much more to do.

Where are We 25 Years Later?

No organization has repeated that instrument with the same professional audience at the twentieth or twenty-fifth anniversary. Any comparison to 2026 therefore has to be assembled from later research that speaks to the same themes rather than from a matched follow-up panel. The most useful recent sources include FEMA's National Household Surveys and National Preparedness Report (Federal Emergency Management Agency [FEMA], 2023, 2024a, 2024b); the NEMA survey of state emergency management directors (National Emergency Management Association [NEMA], 2025), a...

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10 Years Later. A National Survey of Public Safety Professionals. Read the full report [Here](#).

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Written by [Name]

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How Prepared Are We Since 9/11?

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Reuters/Ipsos anniversary poll (Reuters & Ipsos, 2026); a USA Today/Ipsos poll marking 20 years since Katrina (Ipsos, 2025); a 2025 household preparedness study (Gabriele, 2025); first-responder surveys on FirstNet and 9-1-1 operations (NENA & Carbyne, 2025; Public Safety Broadband Technology Association, 2025); and the House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence's review of 9/11 Commission reforms (House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence, 2026). Read together, they do not contradict the 2011 practitioners so much as they finish the sentence those practitioners started.

On the narrow problem the country redesigned itself to solve, another foreign-directed, mass-casualty attack on the scale of 9/11, the subsequent record is stronger than many feared in 2011. There has been no second attack of that magnitude. A bipartisan House Intelligence review released at the Flight 93 memorial concluded that the Commission's institutional reforms largely succeeded in that most fundamental purpose (House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence, 2026). FirstNet, born of the Commission's interoperability recommendation, now supports millions of public-safety connections, and first responders have lined up behind its reauthorization (Public Safety Broadband Technology Association, 2025). Six in ten Americans in the Reuters/Ipsos anniversary poll said the post-9/11 government response has been at least somewhat effective at preventing attacks on U.S. soil (Reuters & Ipsos, 2026). The threat those same Americans now rank first, however, is no longer the one that organized the decade after 2001. Forty-two percent named random mass violence as the greatest danger to average people; 33 percent named domestic terrorism; only 20 percent named foreign terror. The 71 percent who said we were better prepared for "a terrorist attack" were not wrong. They were answering a question whose meaning has shifted. What official architecture did not invent on September 11 was the improvisation of ordinary people. Martin (2021b) has described the New York ferry captains' self-organized evacuation of Lower Manhattan as a reminder that emergent behavior remains a core, and still underused, element of catastrophic response.

The parts of the 2011 survey that have traveled least well are not the preparedness headlines. They are the warnings about money, people, and time. State emergency management directors in the Deloitte-NEMA study named funding as their single largest challenge, at 64 percent. Given more resources, 97 percent would put them into workforce and 89 percent into technology and infrastructure. Only 25 percent said their employees have the skills the current mission requires. Directors would prefer to spend 44 percent of their time on mitigation; they report spending about 5 percent (Deloitte & NEMA, 2025). The 9-1-1 system that stitches response together is showing the same strain: the 2025 Pulse of 9-1-1 survey found outages in 88 percent of centers and burnout overtaking vacancies as the top workforce complaint (NENA & Carbyne, 2025). Collaboration did improve after 9/11, just as 92 percent of the CEMR-partnered respondents said it had. What the country did not do was staff and fund that collaborative architecture for a multi-hazard, always-on tempo. Martin (2021a) has argued that emergency management will not mature as a profession until practice is routinely grounded in evidence rather than in doctrine written far from the incident.

Household and natural-hazard readiness remain the softer half of the 2011 split. FEMA's 2023 National Household Survey found that 51 percent of adults believed they were prepared for a disaster, up from 42 percent in 2017, and that more people were taking basic preparedness actions (FEMA, 2023, 2024a). A 2025 SafeHome.org survey of 1,200 adults was less reassuring at the kit level: only 5 percent reported a complete emergency supply kit, and only 26 percent felt very or extremely confident they would know what to do in a major disaster (Gabriele, 2025). Marking 20 years since Katrina, a USA Today/Ipsos poll found that

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How Prepared Are We Since 9/11?

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Americans still consider well-funded emergency systems essential—and that a plurality expected the federal response to a Katrina-scale event would be worse today, not better (Ipsos, 2025). That sits uncomfortably next to the 56 percent of 2011 professionals who thought the nation had already improved on Katrina. Systems such as NIMS, THIRA/SPR, fusion centers, and public-safety broadband are more mature. Confidence in depth, surge capacity, and household resilience is not. Martin’s recovery research makes the same point from the other side of the disaster cycle: without transparent local governance and community engagement, even well-designed federal programs fail to convert into durable community outcomes (Martin, 2022).

A Cautious 25-Year Scorecard

2011 Theme	2011 Finding	2026 Extrapolation
Better prepared for terrorism than pre-9/11	71%	Largely yes for a 2001-style foreign plot; weaker for domestic extremism, drones, and fast radicalization
Better prepared for natural disaster than pre-Katrina	56%	Systems more mature; household depth and federal-surge confidence still contested
Collaboration improved	92% / 88%	Architecture held; capacity and tech have not kept up with tempo
Politics drive funding	88%	Still the dominant practitioner complaint; grant delays and role-shift debates reinforce it
Budgets falling / staff shrinking	58% down; 40% expect fewer staff	Confirmed and compounded; skills gap now explicit (only 25% of state directors say staff are adequately skilled)
Officials not paying enough attention	64–67%	Mission expanded faster than attention or appropriations
Worried about another major terror attack	69%	Worry relocated: domestic extremists and mass violence now outrank foreign terror with the public

25 years later. Five Themes Updated

1. Terrorism architecture improved. The threat picture changed.

On the narrow question the 2011 survey asked—are we better prepared for another 9/11-style attack?—the subsequent record is stronger than many expected in 2011.

There has been no successful, foreign-directed, mass-casualty attack on the scale of September 11. Georgetown’s Bruce Hoffman has noted only one successful foreign-directed plot on U.S. soil since then (Pensacola, 2019). A House Intelligence Committee review released August 31, 2026, at the Flight 93 memorial concluded that the Commission’s institutional reforms—ODNI, NCTC, tighter information sharing—“largely succeeded in their most fundamental purpose: helping prevent another terrorist attack of the magnitude of 9/11 on American soil.” Six in ten Americans in the late-August Reuters/Ipsos poll said the post-9/11 government response has been at least somewhat effective at preventing attacks on U.S. soil. Large bipartisan majorities still say airport security has been worth the inconvenience. FirstNet, a direct descendant of the Commission’s interoperability recommendation, now supports more than 7.8 million connections across about 30,600 agencies; 93% of first responders in a 2025 survey backed reauthorization.

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How Prepared Are We Since 9/11?

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That is the good news. The 2011 respondents were still living in an al-Qaeda frame. The public is not. In the same Reuters/Ipsos poll:

- 42% named random acts of violence / mass shootings as the biggest threat to average Americans
- 33% named domestic terrorism
- 20% named foreign terror

Asked which ideology-driven attacks are the larger threat, 61% picked domestic extremists and 34% picked foreign groups. That is a reversal from mid-2013 Reuters/Ipsos polling, when foreign terror still outranked domestic. CFR fellows marking the 25th anniversary argue the United States is unprepared for terrorism's next wave—drones, compressed radicalization timelines, and under-resourced prevention work—even if it is better prepared for the last one.

Extrapolation: The 71% “better prepared for a terrorist attack” finding has held for the attack the country actually designed against. It does not automatically extend to domestic violent extremism, cyber-physical attacks, or small-unit plots that do not look like 2001.

2. Natural-hazard preparedness is better on paper, uneven in practice, and now the daily job.

The 2011 split—71% better for terror, only 56% better for natural disasters versus Katrina—has, if anything, inverted in the workload. State directors in the Deloitte-NEMA study describe a system living inside stacked weather, flood, fire, public-health, utility, active-shooter, and cyber events. They prefer to spend 44% of their time on mitigation. They actually spend about 5%. The rest is response and recovery. “There is always something going on.”

Household data is mixed and method-sensitive:

- FEMA's 2023 National Household Survey: 51% of adults believed they were prepared (up from 42% in 2017); 57% had taken three or more preparedness actions.
- FEMA's 2024 NHS reported 83% taking three or more actions—a large jump FEMA itself flagged as possibly reflecting instrument changes, not a one-year transformation.
- SafeHome.org's July 2025 survey of 1,200 adults is harsher at the kit level: only 54% had made any emergency preparations in the prior 12 months; 5% reported a complete emergency kit; 26% felt very or extremely confident they know what to do in a major disaster. Cost was the main barrier (52%).
- The August 2025 USA Today/Ipsos Katrina 20th-anniversary poll found 84% say well-coordinated, well-funded emergency systems are very important—and a plurality expected the federal response to a Katrina-scale event would be worse today.

Extrapolation: National systems (NIMS, THIRA/SPR, grant programs, fusion centers, FirstNet) are more mature than in 2011. Household depth and federal surge confidence have not risen in lockstep. The 2011 “better than Katrina” majority looks more fragile in 2025–26 than the “better than 9/11” majority.

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How Prepared Are We Since 9/11?

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3. Collaboration was the 2011 success story. It is now an overloaded operating system.

The 92% / 88% collaboration gains were real. They produced durable infrastructure: ICS/NIMS as common language, fusion centers, Emergency Management Assistance Compact practice, public-private emergency committees, and a dedicated public-safety broadband network.

The 2025 system surveys show that architecture under strain rather than collapse:

- NENA / Carbyne Pulse of 9-1-1 (2025): 88% of emergency communications centers had a technology outage in the prior year (up from 75% in 2024); 9% reported a TDoS or other cyberattack; burnout overtook vacancies as the top workforce complaint even as open positions fell from 82% to 74%.
- Deloitte-NEMA: cyberattacks sit among the threats directors feel least prepared for; nearly 60% rate their technology capability as only intermediate; 85% cite infrastructure, money, familiarity, or procurement as barriers to AI, big data, and advanced risk modeling.
- The 2011 survey already wanted a larger nonprofit role (61%) and a larger private-sector role (74%). That instinct has only grown as agencies try to stretch staff.

Extrapolation: Collaboration improved after 9/11. It has not been staffed or tooled for a multi-hazard, always-on tempo. The next increment is not another MOU. It is workforce, interoperable data, and time to work left of boom.

4. Funding and politics—the 2011 warning that aged the best

This is the cleanest through-line from the 2011 dataset to 2026.

Then: 88% said funding followed politics; 58% had just taken a cut; 61% expected another; 40% expected a smaller workforce in five years; 86% said the lack of a long-term funding plan made it hard to use current resources well.

Now:

- 64% of state EM directors name funding as their single largest challenge—ahead of workforce, policy change, and technology. Given more money, 97% would put it into workforce and 89% into technology and infrastructure.
- Workforce math has caught up with the 2011 forecast: 81% cite budget constraints and 81% a competitive labor market; 64% cite a shortage of qualified candidates; only 25% say their people have the skills the current mission requires.
- Preparedness grant execution is lumpy. FEMA approved only about 27% of 2025 Nonprofit Security Grant applications (1,600 of roughly 6,000), after long delays tied in part to state administrative capacity and DHS disruption.
- A March 2025 executive order, Achieving Efficiency Through State and Local Preparedness, directs a review of national preparedness policy away from a default all-hazards federal posture and toward state, local, and individual ownership. GAO work in late 2025 already records state officials warning that a rapid pullback in federal assistance would outrun state budget cycles.

Extrapolation: The 2011 cohort was not wrong about money. They were early. The five-year staffing decline they feared became a 15-year structural shortage, then collided with COVID attrition, a hotter disaster year-count, and a tighter federal role. Any 25-year “are we prepared?” answer that ignores fiscal design is incomplete.

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5. Public and official attention never matched the mission—and the mission got larger

In 2011, two-thirds of practitioners said every level of government was under-attending to preparedness, even while they credited post-9/11 gains. That tension is still the operating reality.

FEMA's 2024 National Preparedness Report (data through 2023) describes progress in household action and persistent POETE (planning, organizing, equipping, training, exercising) gaps, against a risk landscape of extreme weather and sophisticated cyber incidents. State directors report an expanding mandate without an expanding bench. The public still thinks September 11 "had a major impact" (75%) and still thinks about it periodically (60%), but ranks everyday mass violence and domestic extremism above foreign terror. Attention followed the last shock. The workload followed the climate, the grid, the network, and domestic political violence.

What this Means for Practitioners?

The most honest 25-year reading of the Capella / CEMR Foundation study is therefore not that the 2011 respondents overrated progress or underrated it. It is that they described a country that had built a better machine for the last catastrophe and was already failing to resource the next one.

The United States built a better machine for the last catastrophe, then asked that machine to run a different, larger, and poorly funded mission.

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Integrated Solutions Consulting's involvement through the CEMR Foundation was an early attempt to put practitioner evidence, not only official doctrine, in front of policymakers (Capella University, 2011; Martin, 2011). Fifteen years later, the evidence has changed in the details—cyber risk, domestic extremism, 9-1-1 fragility, an aging and thin emergency management bench—but not in the plot. The United States is better structured against September 11 than it was on September 10, 2001. It is still under-attended, under-funded, and under-staffed for the disasters that now fill the calendar. That was the survey's warning in 2011. It remains the operational problem in 2026.

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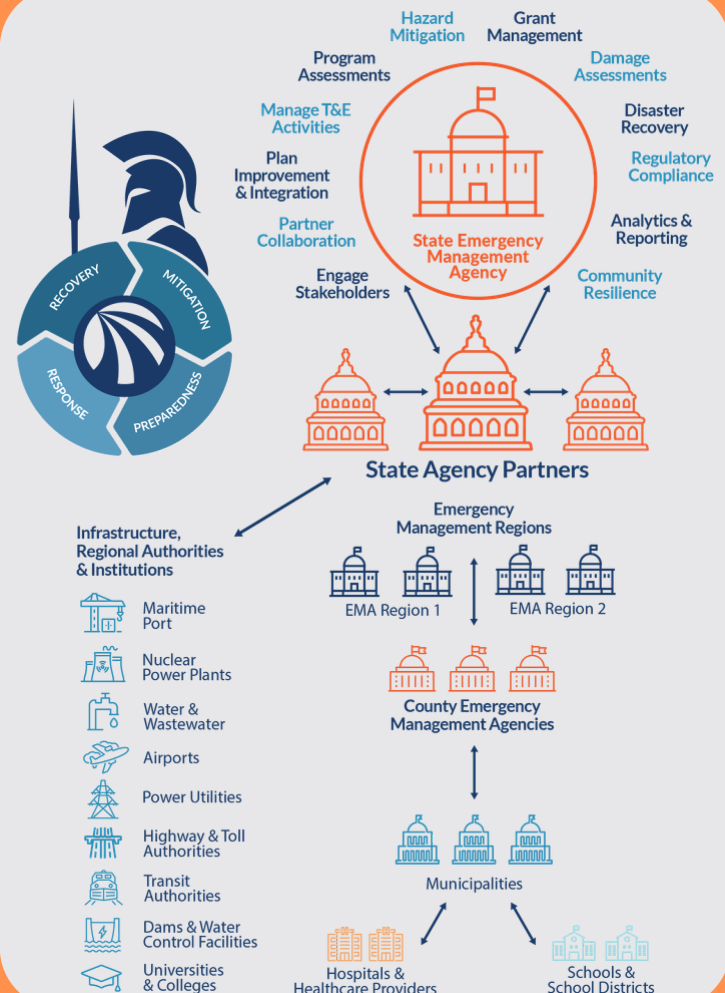


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