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Courts' Response to 9/11: A 'Testament to Resilience'

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The terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, had a profound impact on our nation, our state, and our city. The attacks, an expression of hatred for our government and our way of life, challenged our culture of openness, freedom and the rule of law.

It is a testament to the resilience of our democratic values that the courts have responded to the new realities of a post-9/11 world by enhancing security and emergency preparedness while remaining open and accessible to litigants and the public we serve.

On this 10th anniversary, we deeply mourn the loss of those who died that day, including members of our court family, Captain William Harry Thompson, Sergeant Mitchel Wallace and Sergeant Thomas Jurgens. There is no better way to honor our own fallen heroes and all those who were lost than to strengthen the institutions that protect all Americans without compromising the essential principles of due process of law, fundamental fairness, openness and accountability.

In the period since the attacks, the court system has taken a number of important steps to improve public safety.

First and foremost, we made changes to security, developing emergency response protocols to ensure continuity of operations in the event of a crisis.

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Training for court officers was expanded to include emergency response preparation and evacuation drills, and we established special response teams to handle demonstrations, judicial threats, and other challenging situations.

Shortly after 9/11, we instituted 24-hour security patrols and closed vulnerable underground parking facilities. We established a comprehensive Internet-enabled camera surveillance system that runs on the court system's high-speed data network and has greatly increased our ability to remotely monitor security in dozens of courthouses round the clock.

Every courthouse has developed an emergency preparedness plan in the event that the courthouse must be evacuated and resume functioning in another location.

We installed hundreds of new magnetometers and x-ray machines to improve screening at our courthouse doors, and we instituted the "Secure Pass" program, which allows attorneys to enter our courthouses more quickly without compromising security.

One of the lessons of 9/11 is the importance of ensuring that the courts have a seat at the table when it comes to state and local emergency preparedness planning. Working closely with the mayor's and governor's offices in the wake of the attacks resulted in relationships that are still intact.

Court security personnel are now permanently assigned to New York City's Office of Emergency Management and to the New York City Police Counter-Terrorism Task Force. We also obtained passage of legislation that mandates inclusion of the courts in state and local emergency planning processes.

The horrific events of Sept. 11, 2001, ushered in a new era of heightened awareness, increased security, and closer coordination with other government agencies. Those events altered the way we think about safety and security and have resulted in new practices and enhancements to existing operations.

But more important than what has changed is what has remained constant: Our courts continue to administer equal justice, protect our freedoms, and safeguard the rule of law in an open and transparent way.
