



Prepared Remarks

**Attorney General John Ashcroft
Press Availability
September 13, 2001**

September 11, 2001 was a day of unspeakable violence and outrage, but also a day of heroism and sacrifice. As endangered and terrified men and women struggled to make their way out of burning, collapsing buildings, firemen, police officers and emergency rescue personnel struggled to make their way in.

Many - we don't know how many yet - never made it out.

Even as we continue to hold out hope that more of these brave Americans will be found alive, it is my duty as Attorney General to begin the process of providing relief to the families of public safety officers who sacrificed so that others might survive the attacks of September 11.

The Public Safety Officers' Benefits Act of 1976 provides for approximately \$150,000 in benefits to the families of law enforcement officers, firemen, emergency response squad members and ambulance crew members who are killed in the line of duty.

This morning, President Bush directed me immediately to implement procedures streamlining the application and approval process of claims for benefits under this act.

Pursuant to the President's directive, the Department of Justice this morning has taken the following actions to expedite the delivery of benefits to public safety officers' families:

First, the existing regulations under the Public Safety Officers Benefits Act require that officers' families and employing agencies fill out individual forms certifying that the officer was killed in the line of duty, that no disqualifying circumstances were present, and that the officer was, in fact, related to the family members seeking benefits.

These regulations direct the Bureau of Justice Assistance to give substantial weight to evidence presented by Federal, state and local agencies and to resolve in favor of payment any reasonable doubt concerning the circumstances of the officer's permanent disability or death.

In view of the unprecedented loss of life and debilitating injuries to public safety officers, I have directed, pursuant to President Bush's request, that this process be streamlined.

I am directing the Office of Justice Programs to exercise the full scope of its discretion under the statute and regulations to accept applications, consider evidence justifying claims and to process prompt payment of benefits.

In cases in which benefits are sought by survivors of officers killed in the line of duty on September 11, I am directing that blanket certifications from executives of public safety agencies be considered as evidence of eligibility without requiring further individualized documentation.

In addition, the family claim form will be abbreviated.

Second, the Department of Justice's Office of Justice Programs is immediately making available additional resources to see that the claims of fallen officers' families are processed as quickly as possible.

- Staff are being brought in to New York and elsewhere to assist with case processing.
- A separate computer data base is being established to expedite and monitor case processing.
- Lawyers from the Office of Justice Programs are immediately reviewing all cases from

New York.

- Office of Justice Programs staff are also being sent to New York to assist with family contacts and the assembly of claim packages, including the gathering of pertinent records.

- Office of Justice Programs representatives will be available on-site, if requested, to pre-certify claim packages as complete. These representatives will also work with the Treasury Department to expedite payments to families once claims are approved.

The provision of benefits is an insufficient but necessary response on behalf of the American people to the unknown number of firemen, law enforcement officers and medical rescue personnel who died answering the call of their fellow citizens on September 11.

It is President Bush's and my hope that the actions being announced today will provide a measure of relief to the husbands and wives and children left behind.

And I know that it is the nation's hope that this assistance will stand as a gesture of our inexpressible gratitude, as well as a small tribute to the honor of their sacrifice.

Today, I announced with the Treasury Department a step that has been taken to provide additional security at airports across the country.

As airports re-open and resume air travel, there will be a substantially increased security presence on the ground at designated security checkpoints throughout the country.

The Departments of Justice and Treasury have deployed hundreds of agents of the U.S. Marshals Service, U.S. Border Patrol, and U.S. Customs as part of a broad effort by federal law enforcement authorities to provide a larger police presence at airports in addition to the heightened security procedures already put into effect.

We will take all necessary precautions to protect American travelers.

Lastly, our nation calls on us to be at our best in order to prevail in these very difficult times.

Since Tuesday the Justice Department has received reports of violence and threats of violence against Arab-Americans and other Americans of Middle Eastern and South Asian descents.

We must not descend to the level of those who perpetrated Tuesday's violence by targeting individuals based on their race, their religion, or their national origin.

Such reports of violence and threats are in direct opposition to the very principles and laws of the United States and will not be tolerated.

I now have a few updates with regard to the ongoing investigation:

- Legal attaches around the world are receiving enormous cooperation from law enforcement authorities in their host countries in the process of following up on leads. We have also received numerous offers for help from other countries if needed. We are grateful for the assistance being offered.
- With regard to federal law enforcement personnel casualties. There is one FBI agent assigned to the New York field office who is missing. Three U.S. Marshals who are assigned to the Southern District of New York sustained minor injuries. We are also in the process of collecting information nationwide regarding loss of life and casualties among law enforcement personnel.
- As of this morning the FBI's leads hotline has received 2,055 phone calls. Some of the leads have been helpful to the investigation. The leads website has received more than 22,700 suggested tips.
- The FBI is working over 3,000 leads.
- None of the black boxes has been recovered yet, however we believe retrieval of the black box at the Somerset County is most feasible in the short term.
- The total number of hijackers on the four planes that crashed was at least 18.

Now we will be happy to answer your questions.