



The Future

What can the DR community learn from Sept. 11?

By Maria R. Volpe

In the aftermath of the tragic events of Sept. 11, a few crucial questions are emerging for the ADR field: What did the thousands of individuals who consider themselves ADR practitioners do in response to Sept. 11, and what lessons, if any, were learned by the ADR field?

Among the most vivid memories we have of the incident are of the extraordinary response efforts undertaken after the attacks by people from all walks of life. In New York City, the epicenter of the most massive and visible response activity, the daunting circumstances provided a context for thousands of individuals to render a wide range of assistance. Many of the professionals who responded knew "more or less" what they could or should do. Police, fire fighters, physicians, nurses, mental health professionals, religious, and environmental workers, among others, had a sense of how their skills, knowledge and expertise could be used. Their work has left an indelible image in the minds and hearts of all Americans.

Yet, in light of these vast efforts, do any memorable public images of mediators, facilitators, conciliators or other related dispute resolvers responding to Sept. 11 come to mind?

Probably not, for the response role to the crisis seemed much more elusive for the dispute resolution field.

Little call

In New York City, it was not unusual for dispute resolvers to hear comments like "they really could use you," or "if only you could have helped to resolve those conflict situations, the tragedies could have been avoided." Despite this perception of need in the days and weeks following Sept. 11, there seemed to be no

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high profile calls for dispute resolvers. Even where there may have been a more traditional need for someone from the ADR field — like facilitating a conflict between police and fire fighters at Ground Zero — mediators were not called upon.

Like many other affinity groups, dispute resolvers in New York City came together to discuss and ponder about what they could or should do as dispute resolvers beyond their efforts of donating blood, participating in sessions on some aspect of Sept. 11, becoming knowledgeable about Islam, helping out at Ground Zero, etc. These discussions only raised more questions than answers. What could dispute resolvers really do as dispute resolvers? If dispute resolvers were called upon, what else did they need to know to do ADR work effectively? Should they initiate some efforts or wait to be called upon? Who should they reach out to?

These are questions worth attempting to answer, for the benefit of the field and world in which it operates. Such an effort will contribute to our understanding of the potential contributions, as well as the challenges, experienced by those doing ADR related work after a large-scale, emotionally charged conflict-related situation. With few exceptions, our current knowledge about the responses by the vast majority of mediators, facilitators, conciliators and other dispute resolvers regarding post-Sept. 11 ADR work is largely impressionistic.

Answering these questions begins with collecting information about what dispute resolvers in fact did, or now see they could have done, in the aftermath of Sept. 11. In this regard, the City University of New York Dispute Resolution Consortium at John Jay College of Criminal Justice has undertaken a research project addressing the implications of Sept. 11 for the ADR field, its practitioners and professional organizations. With the assistance of a grant

from the PSC-CUNY Research Program, the study will collect and analyze the early non-litigious responses to terrorist attacks by those involved in the dispute resolution field. This research project builds on the post-Sept. 11 work of the CUNY DRC, which has been convening dispute resolvers scholars and practitioners in the NYC area since shortly after the tragic events.

Time of the essence

Time is of the essence for this project, for as time passes, the many stories, narratives and data about any intervention efforts will be lost. Hence, this research project is on a fast track to find out what transpired for dispute resolvers at an extraordinarily significant historic moment. Data will be gathered through listserv requests, questionnaires and by conducting interviews of selected dispute resolution practitioners. Information will also be gathered from websites, newsletters, newspapers, journals, listserv archives and other printed sources.

For this research project, dispute resolvers are encouraged to think about what they did in response to Sept. 11. What could have been ADR responses? What are some of the lessons for dispute resolution practitioners, organizations as well as the larger field? Was there some point at which ADR work seemed to become more relevant, or should have become more relevant?

Readers are encouraged to share any information regarding experiences or initiatives by dispute resolvers in response to Sept. 11 by visiting <http://johnjay.jjay.cuny.edu/dispute> or contacting Dr. Maria Volpe at John Jay College of Criminal Justice-CUNY, 899 Tenth Avenue, Room 520, New York, NY 10019, (212) 237-8692 or mvolpe@jjay.cuny.edu. Research assistants for this project, Nickie Phillips and Jennifer Furst, can be reached at 212-237-8686.