

TESTIMONY OF DEBRA BURLINGAME

TUESDAY, DECEMBER 7, 2021

HEARING ON THE 9/11 MEMORIAL & MUSEUM ACT, H.R. 5230

**HOUSE COMMITTEE ON NATIONAL RESOURCES, SUBCOMMITTEE
ON NATIONAL PARKS, FORESTS and PUBLIC LANDS**

Chairman Neguse, Ranking Member Fulcher, and Members of the Committee, thank you for allowing me to testify today on HR 5230, the 9/11 Memorial & Museum Act. Thank you to this Committee for your support in the past, and thank you to Representatives Nadler and Katko for your continued support and for providing testimony today.

My name is Debra Burlingame. I am a founding Board member of the National September 11 Memorial & Museum. I am one of 10 9/11 family members who are greatly privileged to serve on the Board. My brother, Captain Charles F. “Chic” Burlingame, was the pilot-in-command of American Airlines Flight 77, the plane that was hijacked by five al-Qaeda terrorists and crashed into the Pentagon on September 11, 2001, killing 59 passengers and crew—including five young children—and 125 people inside the Pentagon. Dozens more at the Pentagon who survived the attack were severely injured and burned.

Chic was a U.S. Naval Academy graduate, a former carrier-based fighter pilot who served in the United States Navy 25 years, combined active duty and reserve. He was distinctly aware of the potential danger of a terrorist suicide mission used against passenger aircraft. He talked about it with his siblings. It was both chilling and heart-wrenching for us to learn from Flight 77’s recovered Flight Data Recorder that Chic and his co-pilot fought their attackers for six-and-a-half minutes, trying to defend the cockpit and save the lives of their passengers and crew.

I would venture that, today, the 9/11 Memorial & Museum’s executive leadership, senior staff, and Board of Trustees are more sharply aware of potential security threats in what is now called the “post-9/11 world” than any other cultural institution in the U.S. Indeed, we understand that we can never go back to September 10th, because that would require unknowing the hard lessons of that day. We have dedicated our efforts over the last 20 years to learning, preserving, and teaching the history of 9/11 on behalf of all those who survived it, all who witnessed it, all who are too young to remember it, and most importantly, those who were not yet born and their cohorts in future generations. This has been a daunting task, not simply because of the seriousness of the subject, the global nature and impact of the subject matter, but because we who lived through it will one day be gone. And so, we are trustees not simply of a 9/11 memorial made of concrete, cascading water, and the names—stenciled into bronze panels—of beloved friends, family members, colleagues, and fellow human beings. We are trustees of history.

It is always important to remember that the World Trade Center was attacked on February 26, 1993, when al-Qaeda terrorists exploded a 1,300 lb. truck bomb under the North Tower, destroying four floors of the underground garage, killing six—including a woman who was seven months pregnant, injuring 1,000, and causing the evacuation of 50,000 people. The bomb was intended to cause the collapse of Tower 1 into Tower 2. It sent thick, black smoke up 93 floors, terrifying occupants trying to get out. The power outage stalled elevators, stranding people inside them for more than five hours in the smoke-filled darkness.

9/11 wasn't the last deadly terrorist attack in lower Manhattan, either. Just four years ago, a lone wolf terrorist inspired by ISIS videos killed eight people and injured a dozen more by running them down with a rental truck on a bike path along the West Side Highway in New York City. The perpetrator is still awaiting a trial on 22 charges, including murder, attempted murder, and material support for terrorism. It is no co-incidence that the killer chose that highway and that location, just a stone's throw from Ground Zero, indeed, the very highway that rescue and recovery vehicles used on and after 9/11 to access the site.

This past January, the FBI announced another arrest of an active-duty U.S. soldier who attempted to contact ISIS for the purpose of engaging in attacks on U.S. soil as well as facilitating attacks on U.S. troops overseas. The list of landmark targets in New York City included the 9/11 Memorial. The case is notable, not because the man posed a serious credible threat—the FBI was monitoring him for months—but as an example of the continued interest in exploiting 9/11 for propaganda purposes.

The National September 11 Memorial & Museum (9/11 Memorial & Museum) recently led the world in commemorating the 20th anniversary of the attacks on our nation. The annual ceremony was attended by more than 8,500 9/11 family members who were joined by two former U.S. presidents and the current President of the United States, the Speaker, Majority Leader, and numerous Members of Congress and Administration officials, all there to pay their respects. Throughout the day, more than 60,000 people from all over the globe visited the 9/11 Memorial—on just that one day—to remember those who were killed and reflect on how far we've come. Since the Memorial's opening 10 years ago, the 9/11 Memorial & Museum has hosted over 53 million visitors from every state in the nation and more than 170 countries. People come from all walks of life to visit, pay their respects, and learn about the 9/11 attacks, what led up to them, and how that day continues to affect our world today.

Like so many other cultural organizations, the 9/11 Memorial & Museum faced the unimaginable reality of having to close to the public in March of 2020, due to COVID-19. The four months of Memorial closure and six months of Museum closure created an unprecedented financial challenge as the primary source of operating support – revenue generated by the Museum admissions – collapsed entirely with more than 95% of 2020 operating revenue lost as a result of COVID-19 protocols. To date, the Memorial & Museum are only seeing approximately 30% of visitorship compared to 2019.

The institution implemented necessary budget cuts in March, with further significant and difficult reductions in June, including the heartbreaking decision to lay-off and furlough nearly 60% of staff. To achieve the budgetary reductions, senior managerial and executive staff together with the Board of Trustees assessed all operational and programmatic areas, classifying each as retained, reduced, or suspended. The institution strove to maintain all core operational and

programmatic commitments. Wherever possible, departments adapted activities and initiatives not conducive to producing in the current pandemic environment by converting previously in-person events and programs to virtual offerings. This enabled the institution to ensure it was still serving its mission as well as engaging with key stakeholders as much as possible, with the added benefit of often reaching a larger and more geographically diverse audience in educational programming.

The Memorial reopened to the public on July 4, 2020, and the Museum on September 11, 2020. The organization developed and adopted a robust and comprehensive Health and Safety Plan, which is regularly updated and goes above and beyond guidance issued by the CDC, New York State, and New York City, and with which enforcement and compliance has been exemplary. The plan has served as a model for many other institutions.

For those unable to visit in person in 2020, the Museum continued to offer and expand its virtual programming. In addition to online public programs, our live, virtual tours of the Memorial and the Museum provided an easily accessed, interactive experience for individuals, families, and groups. The institution also launched virtual field trips for students in grades 3-12 and online professional development programs for educators and for civic agencies.

Children born after 9/11 are now adults. A full generation in our workforce, our colleges, and our military is growing-up in a world where the events of 9/11/01 impact their lives but is something they learn about from history books and documentaries. This past anniversary, the Memorial & Museum was able to reach over a million [1,065,000] students and teachers in every state and around the globe through our annual *Anniversary in the Schools* webinar, furthering our mission to educate future generations about the attacks and their global impact—and helping them to understand how 9/11 affects their lives today.

The rebuilt World Trade Center site is a beacon of hope and resilience, but it cannot be forgotten that this site has been attacked by terrorists twice. The 9/11 Memorial and Museum's security must be approached with utmost seriousness. All visitors and bags are subject to security screening prior to admittance onto the 9/11 Memorial Museum through X-ray machines and magnetometers. Alternative screening techniques, including hand-wanding and pat-down inspections, are also available.

While the Memorial & Museum partner and work closely with the NYPD and PAPD and our state and federal law enforcement partners to adapt to changing threat levels and risks, the responsibility for securing the Memorial and Museum falls to the organization. When the necessary budget cuts affected every department at the institution, we recognized that security is one area that simply cannot be underfunded, with monthly costs approaching \$1M. Enacting HR5230 would help the institution cover its security costs as it continues to rebound and recover from the impact of COVID-19.

As with other sites of atrocity, in addition to keeping our visitors, staff, and the site itself safe, our security team works to enforce visitor rules and regulations, maintaining decorum and respectful behavior throughout this sacred space.

No reflection about 9/11 and the nation's response to that day is complete without recognition of the commitment, accomplishments, and heroic sacrifices of our military. Whether in the mountains of Afghanistan or the sands of Iraq, they have refused to flinch in the face of a brutal

enemy that does not abide by the same rules of engagement that our military imposes on itself. Members of the military, a large number of whom signed up for service or re-enlisted as a result of the 9/11 attacks, have never taken down the flags of 9/11 or forgotten that day. The 9/11 Memorial & Museum continues to be a place of hope and comfort for this community, hosting more than 150 military reenlistment ceremonies annually on the 9/11 Memorial plaza. We have a solemn obligation to continue operations to the greatest extent possible for those who responded to the call of duty on behalf of us all.

In closing, I again want to thank you for your time and consideration. I know how deeply you all appreciate the importance of this historic national institution. More than 250 Members of Congress have visited the site since the Memorial's opening on the 10th anniversary of the attacks, and I invite those of you who have not yet had the opportunity to do so, to visit as well. I know you would be proud to stand on the site of what was such an atrocity and experience it now as a place of resilience, hope, and inspiration for our nation and the world.

Thank you.

9/11 Memorial & Museum's Mission

The National September 11 Memorial & Museum at the World Trade Center bears solemn witness to the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 and February 26, 1993. Respecting this site made sacred through loss, the Memorial & Museum remembers and honors the nearly 3,000 victims of these attacks and all those who risked their lives to save others. It further recognizes the thousands who survived and all who manifested extraordinary compassion and leadership in the wake of the attacks. Demonstrating the consequences of terrorism on individual lives and its impact on communities at the local, national, and international levels, the Memorial & Museum attests to the triumph of human dignity over human depravity and affirms an unwavering commitment to the fundamental value of human life.

May the lives remembered, the deeds recognized, and the spirit reawakened be eternal beacons, which reaffirm respect for life, strengthen our resolve to preserve freedom, and inspire an end to hatred, ignorance, and intolerance.