

NOW, A TERRIBLE FEELING OF VULNERABILITY, FEAR

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ABSTRACT (ABSTRACT)

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FULL TEXT

Bombing in Oklahoma Hoping for survivors, hunting for terrorists
Anxious. Vulnerable. Outraged.

Security precautions at federal buildings in Hartford and around the country were heightened Thursday. So were the emotions of those inside. Theirs were the feelings of a nation, magnified. Most workers in these hulking government buildings spoke of a disquieting sense of vulnerability. Staff meetings opened with discussions of Oklahoma City -- of the magnitude of a bomb that defied security precautions and of outrage at the sight of bleeding children. If a federal building is not safe, if children are not safe, then who is? "It's not like someone is attacking you and you have a chance to fight back," said Pascale Faustin, a Stamford social worker who often represents immigrants and poor clients at federal hearings. "It is more like war. "Now we know everybody could be a victim. Now, everyone's a target," Faustin said. "If you're not secure in a federal building, can you be secure in your own home?"

Hundreds of federal workers in Hartford each day flow into the Abraham A. Ribicoff building on Main Street and the William R. Cotter building on High Street near the train station. They pass by the American flag and smiling portraits of President Clinton. On most days, they are not so much symbols of federal authority as they are inspectors, clerks, data processors.

Thursday was different for most of them.

"All of us felt the same way -- it just as easily could have been us," said John Connors of his colleagues in the Veterans Affairs office on Main Street.

Connors hastened to compliment the security measures already in place at the Ribicoff building, as he dragged deeply on a cigarette outside its front doors. He just as quickly motioned across the expansive cement plaza, past formidable cement barriers, toward Main Street.

"But they could have a truck parked across the street. How can you protect yourself against something like that?" The barriers were put in place during the mid-1980s prosecutions of members of Los Macheteros -- a militant

Puerto Rican independence group -- in connection with the 1983 robbery of \$7 million from a West Hartford Wells Fargo terminal. The hearings often were marked by intense security -- including closing streets around the courthouse and the positioning of police sharpshooters on adjacent rooftops.

The barriers, including two camouflaged as wooden planters at the plaza's entrance, remain. They comfort some. They remind others, like U.S. Attorney Christopher Droney and Supervising Deputy U.S. Marshal Lee Cunningham, of the delicate balance between public access and public security.

"You can't turn this into a bunker again," Cunningham said. "It's a public building."

But security was quietly ratcheted up at the federal buildings. Security gates that open to admit cars into the private parking garage at the federal courthouse were adjusted to close faster. Employees were given cards reminding them of questions to ask if they receive a bomb threat. Droney said federal and local officials were closely examining traffic patterns.

"Still, the specter we see in Oklahoma City is that no matter how much security is provided, there is still a chance for attack," said Droney. But added security measures offer some solace to those who work within.

"Federal employees realize this bombing was directed at them," Droney said. "They certainly are more anxious." Betsy McQueeney, division chief for the IRS at the Cotter building, said that society as whole is becoming more violent.

"I don't view this as related to the federal employees. I think we're all vulnerable, in any office, anywhere."

Across town at the Ribicoff building, Brad Newcomb, medical rating specialist in the Veterans Affairs office, was fatalistic.

"There's a lot of federal buildings out there. We're just another one of them," Newcomb said. "We went through this every day in Vietnam. You work in a high-profile place like this, you're always subject to what's out there."

For Jim Peckham, an investigator with the state Department of Labor who works at the Cotter building, reminders of the Oklahoma City tragedy are small. And they breathe.

"We have a day care center in this office, too," Peckham said. "We walk by the kids playing every day in our building -- that's what really hit."

It hit parents of those children even harder.

After hearing that many of the victims of Wednesday's blast were children at a day care center in Oklahoma City's federal building, Kim Wimberly -- not a federal worker -- picked up her daughter and took her back to her office. But Thursday morning, assured that security measures were in place, she brought her child back to the Small Wonders day care center in the Cotter building.

"I was a little nervous, but I decided to bring her in," said Wimberly of Bloomfield.

The door to the center is locked and visitors are monitored by camera. An armed security guard patrols the area. Denise Dionizio, the center's director, said absenteeism was no higher than usual Thursday. "Everything was normal today. I think the parents were confident," she said. "The whole center is secure."

Across the street from Hartford's federal courthouse, on the second floor of the Central Baptist Church Thursday afternoon, a dozen preschoolers slept on little cots while a portable tape player rasped out a lullaby. Head teacher Rosa Vasquez felt deeply the tragedy in Oklahoma City because of the death and injuries wreaked on children.

"They were innocents," Vasquez said. "It would scare anyone, and here we are in the middle of downtown."

Assistant teacher Ann Grier said there was no way to shutter the center or safeguard against a tragedy of that magnitude.

"We can't keep them locked up," Grier said. "You just go about your normal day and pray nothing like that happens here."

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