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Destroyed by the Dust

September 11, 2001 is a day America will never forget. The horrifying images of people jumping from great heights and the collapse of the Twin Towers are seared into the memories of millions forever. As the country mourned, thousands of men and women of New York City's rescue apparatus worked hard and selflessly day and night in a massive clean-up operation at Ground Zero to make a catastrophic situation less painful. Since the conclusion of the operation, thousands of World Trade Center rescue and recovery workers have contracted numerous illnesses, most notably lung diseases and cancer. Jessica Firger, Health Editor for CBS Interactive writes "as many as 90,000 people were exposed to potential dangerous debris and toxins at the World Trade Center site. Currently more than 60,000 people are in programs to monitor their health." Finger asserts that pollutants present at the World Trade Center are responsible for rescue worker illnesses. Through the knowledge that I gained on this issue I believe that World Trade Center rescue workers are entitled to federal benefits. While workers were aware of the immediate dangers they would face at Ground Zero, they were unaware of hazardous toxins in the air they would inhale.

The men and women of New York City's rescue services rushed to the World Trade Center to save lives. In the span of 102 minutes, hundreds of first responders perished. When it was over, those responders who were still alive began the extensive and emotional rescue and

recovery operation. For eight months they worked twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week sifting through debris in the hopes of finding anything that could help identify a victim so families could have a small amount of closure. The conditions were dangerous with fires burning until December 2001. There were many crevices in which rescuers had to tunnel through where jagged objects were hidden and which caused serious injury. Many additional rescuers who were not present on 9/11 volunteered because for them it was the right thing to do in light of the fact that so many had lost their lives. This would continue until the operation's completion in May 2002. Afterwards rescue workers began experiencing various respiratory problems which would eventually escalate.

In the ensuing years workers began experiencing respiratory issues following their involvement in the rescue and recovery efforts at the World Trade Center. In Wu Maxoin's et al. article "Case Report Lung Disease In World Trade Center Responders Exposed to Dust and Smoke: Carbon Nanotubes Found in the Lungs of World Trade Center Patients and Dust Samples" a 2010 study was conducted in which they observed seven World Trade Center rescue and recovery workers who had exhibited respiratory issues since the end of the clean-up operation at Ground Zero. In the study they found a nexus between Ground Zero and lung illness. The researchers observed similarities in particles found in samples collected from the lungs of first responders and dust samples collected at the World Trade Center. They concluded that pollutants from the World Trade Center are the culprit in causing respiratory illness amongst the responders. Based on the results of this study rescue workers gave everything. All seven have lung illnesses that will affect the quality of their lives, ironic payment for the sacrifice they made. Some rescue workers' health conditions are so poor they require major surgery to save their

lives. Marion et al write that a participant referenced to as Patient A “has been referred for a lung transplant”(500). Patient A put her life on the line by helping at Ground Zero and has earned the right to receive federal benefits. Without the availability of federal aid Patient A may not afford life saving organ transplant. While lung disease has been on the rise amongst rescue workers, the risk of cancer has become exceedingly high since the finish of rescue and recovery operations at Ground Zero.

The prospect of developing cancer is exceedingly high amongst rescue and recovery workers. An article written by Samara Solan et al., “Cancer Incidence in World Trade Center Rescue and Recovery Workers, 2001-2008” describes the rate of cancer in 20,000 rescue and recovery workers in a seven year period. The article states that there is an “estimated 15% increase in all cancer sites combined among all responders”(701). Federal aid could assist in possible cancer treatments which are expensive. Without the treatment they could deteriorate at a faster rate and ultimately succumb to their illnesses. The article also states that there will be “significant increases over expected registry-based incidence for thyroid cancer, prostate cancer, combined hematopoietic and lymphoid cancers, and soft tissue cancers”(701). The results of this study provide a bleak outlook for the workers. It is alarming that rescue and recovery workers can be susceptible to such a plethora of cancers. Compared to the general public, rescue workers have an even higher chance of obtaining cancer. Laura Blue’s article “Study Hints at Potential Increased Risk of Cancer Among 9/11 Rescue Workers for *Time* magazine reports on a study released by the *Journal of the American Medical Association* which discovered that workers face a higher risk of cancer by being exposed to the debris at Ground Zero. In order to differentiate the cancer risk between the public and rescue workers 55,700 people were examined. 22,000 of

those studied were rescue and recovery workers. The study concluded that “rescue and recovery workers harbor a 43% higher risk of prostate cancer compared to other residents of New York State”(Blue). For such a large group of individuals to have a high cancer risk is proof that there is a connection between the fallout at the World Trade Center and the influx of illnesses that are now affecting workers. With substantial numbers of rescue and recovery workers at great risk to contract cancer it is imperative they get federal aid. The numbers are also indicative of how many workers were not made knowledgeable of the grisly nature of the air. The manifestation of lung disease and cancer is directly correlated to the dust clouds created by the collapse of the Twin Towers.

When the Twin Towers collapsed they produced monstrous clouds of dust engulfing the tip of Lower Manhattan. The composition of the dust contained numerous pollutants which are hazardous to breathe in. Wu Maxion et al. write in their article that the contents of the dust comprised of “cement dust, asbestos, microscopic shards of glass, silica, heavy metals, and numerous compounds”(499). The dust in its original form as building materials which comprised the structure of the towers did not pose an immediate threat. During the collapse of the towers the materials were pulverized into the infamous dust clouds. The clouds contained a toxic cocktail which was lethal to workers at Ground Zero. For example, asbestos when inhaled cannot be exhaled by the lungs and can cause asbestosis and cancer such as mesothelioma. Unfortunately, first responders did not realize this while toiling at Ground Zero which is why they deserve federal benefits. Had they been alerted of the toxins in the air they would have taken the necessary precautions in protecting themselves. The task of relaying this information to

the rescue workers was the responsibility of the Environmental Protection Agency or EPA. The EPA in turn conveyed inaccurate information to the rescue workers.

In the days following the attack the EPA released information concerning the air quality at Ground Zero that was inaccurate. In his book *City of Dust: Illness, Arrogance and 9/11* Anthony DePalma quotes the head of the EPA Christine Todd Whitman in which she stated in a press conference “we are encouraged that the results from our monitoring of air quality and drinking water conditions in both New York and the Pentagon show that the public in these areas is not being exposed to excessive levels of asbestos or other substances”(DePalma 39). Whitman is making a generalized statement by placing the public and the rescue workers under one umbrella. By not creating the distinction as it relates to the rescue workers, she can deny culpability in allowing workers at ground zero where the air was found to be unsafe. In his book, DePalma further quotes Whitman in the last paragraph of her two page press release in which she states that the EPA has “assisted efforts to provide dust masks to rescue workers to minimize inhalation of dust”(DePalma 39). Whitman makes herself and the EPA look like the good guys by stating they facilitated in the efforts of making dust masks available to rescue workers so that the inhalation of dust was reduced. Hence, the EPA and Whitman appear to be helping the rescue workers. Her statement fails to indicate how hazardous the air truly is. Many workers did not use masks because they were led to believe the air was safe. Thus, it stands to reason they are deserving of federal aid. The main reason why the EPA released faulty information is due to the fact that they were unprepared. This led to the mishandling of critical information by the agency. The results of which led the rescue workers to unwittingly endanger themselves. They breathed in dangerous toxins and were later diagnosed with a myriad of illnesses.

Upon arrival at ground zero the EPA commenced testing to analyze the air quality on site. The results of the tests were handled irresponsibly. Anthony DePalma describes how the day after 9/11 the first analysis of dust samples from ground zero taken by the EPA showed a range of results from non-issue to distressing samples with as high as 4.5% asbestos contamination(DePalma 33). Numbers these high are cause for concern and at the very least required properly informing the rescue workers to proceed with caution until further analysis is conducted. The EPA is tasked with the responsibility of notifying everyone with a potential health risk exposure. This failure by a federal agency has grossly contributed to the health issues associated with 9/11 rescue workers. To compound the situation the EPA was unsure of which asbestos safety protocols to follow. DePalma further writes that “the EPA didn’t know which asbestos safety standards to apply. Confusion even arose over how measurements ought to be taken”(DePalma 35). The fact that the EPA did not know what they were faced with is mind boggling. The expectations for a federal organization like the EPA are that it would be prepared under any circumstances. The inability of the EPA to figure out a proper procedure has led to serious illnesses among rescue workers. Therefore, this is the reason why rescue and recovery workers should be issued federal aid. Rescue workers are suffering from illnesses due to the EPA’s lack of knowledge on what procedures to follow. Fast forward to the present and the federal government has made it difficult for first responders to qualify for benefits.

At present, the federal government has made it a challenge for sick rescue and recovery workers to receive federal benefits. In her article “Not Enough Evidence to Link 9/11 and cancer, a Federal Report Says” written for *The New York Times*, Anemone Hartcollis describes a federal study which includes that the link between cancer and ground zero isn’t clear enough. The

workers who labored at the World Trade Center during and after the attacks put their lives at risk to help others. They worked in dangerous conditions which required working near and around jagged steel beams and deep crevices. These dangerous conditions caused injuries and could possibly have even killed them. Not once did those men and women think about themselves in their efforts to help others. So, why then must they be subjected to red tape in their attempts to receive aid and then get denied the aid they so desperately need and have earned.

During the clean up operation at Ground Zero, New York City's rescue and recovery workers symbolized healing and strength. Their sacrifice and heroism inspired the nation to get back to normal as a way of showing the world that terrorism cannot destroy the resolve of the United States. Sadly, they have become stricken with lung ailments and cancers that have shattered their health and their lives. Their plight is further marred by the irresponsible actions of the bureaucracy that has rejected their petitions for assistance. Even with the passage of the Zadroga Act, the rescue workers still encounter difficulties qualifying for benefits. Their valiant, and selfless commitment has entitled them to all benefits stipulated under the Zadroga Act. It has been thirteen years since 9/11. It is time to take aggressive measures to assure that Ground Zero rescue workers are compensated for their sacrifices. They have earned and should receive any and all benefits they require to treat their ailments.