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Sick, Worried & Overlooked

BY ROGER M. WILLIAMS

That's the plight of AFSCME members who have been physically or psychologically ill since they helped combat the effects of the 9/11 terrorist attacks.

Photography by Mark Haven

NEW YORK CITY

It's been more than five years since terrorist attacks leveled the World Trade Center. Yet the wounds inflicted remain raw and burning — except for the relatives of victims, nowhere more strongly than among the city workers directly impacted. Many of these men and women belong to DC 37, this city's large AFSCME affiliate, and they played key roles in helping the city cope with the attacks.

Not all of DC 37's members who were affected by the disaster have come forward, making the number necessarily rough. However, the union estimates it at 4,200. Some 3,000 of them were employed by the uniformed Emergency Medical Services (EMS) of the fire department, the remainder by a wide variety of other municipal agencies. For many of the workers, the cause of their illness is obvious: inhaling dust and germs; being frightened and/or sickened by



LEFT: Respiratory problems and dark memories haunt highway repairwoman Renée Boyd, Local 376

RIGHT: Emergency medical technician Michael Kenna, Local 2507, had no idea sickness was overtaking him.

what they witnessed or the duties they performed. For others, the causes are less clear.

In the cases where the cause of ailments are not clear, governmental authorities have often taken the position that the disabling conditions are not demonstrably 9/11 related, so not covered under many or any of the standard systems of compensation: disability pay, line-of-duty injury pay, workers' compensation, Social Security.

Worse, eleven months after the disaster, President George W. Bush refused to release the \$5.1 billion Congress approved for supplemental homeland security programs, including \$90 million to monitor the health of Ground Zero workers. Later, he tried to take back another \$125 million that was promised for the workers. A year after that, it was revealed that just days after the tragedy, the Bush White House pressured the Environmental Protection Agency to downplay the reports of health hazards that arose from the buildings' fall.

Public Employee recently interviewed a half dozen of these workers, spread across five locals and several different types of jobs. The survivors are remarkably calm in the face of their own daunting conditions. But they're also angry at the agencies they feel have failed them. Local 2507's Michael Kenna says that city officials, for example, "haven't been willing to do anything unless you push and push. I had to get an attorney

to call one agency just to get it to acknowledge my application for assistance."

DC 37 quickly pressed for respirators, registration of workers who were at Ground Zero, and money for medical care and tracking. Both the council and several of its locals have continued to lobby for action — and justice. The International has fought for action at the federal level, continuing to call on the administration to allocate funds to monitor workers' health, and working with such influential legislators as Sen. Hillary Clinton and Reps. Carolyn Maloney and Jerrold Nadler, all New York Democrats. Says Maloney, "DC 37 has been at the forefront of this problem, working with me to get Washington's attention on this health disaster that the Bush administration doesn't seem to care much about. I am hopeful that the recent election results will move the issue up the priority list."

'I Just Wanted to Help Our Country'

A small woman with a big job, **Renée Boyd** has for 18 years wrestled heavy equipment on highway-repair jobs for the city. For relaxation, she played softball and handball. So her lungs could certainly handle physical strain. But a couple of days at Ground Zero left her with incipient asthma and inflamed sinuses. Subsequent duty in



the area brought on the kinds of nightmares no respirator can ward off.

“My job down there was making sure our workforce had everything it needed and was operating it in a safe manner,” Boyd says. Like the great majority of her colleagues, she didn’t worry about her own health: “I just wanted to help our country and our workers recover from that terrible crime.”

Her troubles came later, not only with breathing (walking up stairs now leaves her short winded) but also with peace of mind. She was gripped by “an overwhelming feeling of sadness from what I had seen, what my friends told me about their jobs and the fear that it could all happen again at any time.” Boyd has been in therapy ever since. Nevertheless, on return trips down to Ground Zero, the dark memories come flooding back.

Boyd carefully modulates her complaints. She knows that many others who responded that September day — and survived — have it worse than she does. Indeed, one of her co-workers, a young man with no history of heart disease, recently quit his job after suffering a second post-9/11 heart attack. But she admits to apprehension about her future: “I’ve gotten the forms for workers’ comp, and I’m going to file them . . . just in case something happens down the line.”

From Heroics to Health Worries

Far into the night of 9/11, Emergency Medical Technician **Michael Kenna** delivered victims from Ground Zero to a makeshift hospital. Long after that, he sorted out and recorded body parts. All the while, he waded through debris. Higher-ups provided no respirators, only flimsy paper masks that were often coated with dust when the workers received them.

For months afterward, Kenna had no idea that sickness was overtaking him. “It started slow. I vomited blood and wasn’t feeling too good overall, but I didn’t think much about it.” In April 2004, however, he was sent to the hospital with an assortment of ailments: lung disease; post-traumatic stress disorder that produced outbursts of uncontrollable rage and sobbing; “fluttering” vocal cords that altered his voice; sleep apnea; and acid reflux that had him popping more than two dozen Roloids a day.

Kenna has applied for a three-quarter pension and workers’ comp, but meanwhile has continued to work at his longtime station in the South Bronx. He no longer deals with emergencies, however: The former marathon runner now can handle only light duties. And he cannot work overtime, which has cut his income in half. Medical bills are another huge worry. Because a specialist, not his primary care physician, has pre-



LEFT: Auditor Brenda Bradford of Local 1407 watched the first tower fall and inhaled possibly lethal dust after returning to work.

RIGHT: Katrina's destruction magnified the horrors of the World Trade Center attacks for EMS Lieut. Rene Davila of Local 3721.

scribed them, insurance is not covering his blood tests. "And I'm taking 17 drugs a day; simply meeting the co-pays is killing me."

With a weary shake of the head, Kenna mutters, "Make my life easier. Just pay for my meds."

9/11 Creates Double Trouble

On her way to work near the World Trade Center, **Brenda Bradford** emerged from the subway just as the first tower collapsed; panicked, with adrenaline pumping, she ran uptown — farther than she would ever have thought possible. Then, after a week of supposed clean-up, her office building re-opened, obliging the city employees assigned there to return to it.

Bradford sorely needed that intervening week. Distracted by what she'd seen and heard, and by the confirmed or apparent deaths of people she knew, she "couldn't leave home." When she dragged herself back into the office building, a few blocks from Ground Zero, she found "lots of dust and air filters that hadn't been cleaned. A lot of us [in her office] used masks. And outside, it smelled like a morgue."

Health problems have accumulated: thyroid disorder, leading to weight gain and removal of a (benign) lobe; sleep apnea, prompting her to attend sleep clinics; acid reflux, "which I'd never had." Her use of

medications and doctors has ballooned, and she participates in a federal program that provides transportation for those who have difficulty moving about.

Bradford worries mostly about even-worse health issues that may lie ahead. "If there's a class-action suit [on behalf of 9/11 workers] down the line, who knows if I'll still be alive to take part?" But there is, she adds, a bright note: "I find that I don't put things off — like travel — any more. The things I can do, I force myself to do."

Katrina Dealt Final Blow

"Marked depression and anxiety ... to the point of paranoia with auditory hallucinations and illusions ... nightmares and flashbacks about his experiences on 9/11, and feels unjustifiably guilty about his performance on that day."

So reads a psychiatrist's evaluation presented by **Rene Davila**, which ended by "strongly supporting a conclusion of post-traumatic stress disorder of an incapacitating degree." Davila was the first fire department EMS officer at the Trade Center. He worked 16 hours straight that day and at his nearby station for long afterward. In addition to stress, he suffered knee injuries, a hacking cough and high blood pressure. Yet Davila, at this writing, is off the Fire Department payroll and so short of money that he could

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lose his Queens apartment; “I’m even trying to sell my boyhood collection of baseball cards,” he says.

Davila’s psychological problems flared when Hurricane Katrina walloped the Gulf Coast. Television and newspaper images of Katrina’s destruction magnified in his mind the horrors of 9/11, and he obsessed over the losses of home, job, car — “the whole chain reaction.” Too ill to work, he was placed on medical leave in December 2005, and was dropped from the payroll four months later. He has been denied both workers’ comp and line-of-duty pay. Unable to pick up the premiums, he has lost his job-related medical insurance. He feels that the fire department has essentially abandoned him: “When I told my captain about the problems I was having, he said, ‘Go get a cup of coffee.’”

For his AFSCME local, however, the lieutenant has nothing but praise: “The president — Tom Eppinger — has been outstanding. He even offered to loan me money out of his own pocket.”

‘You’ve Got Lung Disease’

Picture a middle-aged man tethered to an oxygen tank around the clock while he cares for himself and his Alzheimer-stricken mother. That was **Bob Ziehl’s** plight for two years. And with his pay at first suspended and then reduced, he had to fund even that

difficult existence himself, cashing in a life-insurance policy to do so.

Lung disease was the culprit. Ziehl did not work at Ground Zero, on 9/11 or later. But, breath after breath, he inhaled literal snootfuls of dust as city vehicles from Ground Zero rumbled through his workplace — Manhattan’s Queens Midtown Tunnel — spreading pollutants as they went.

Others on his crew, all members of Local 1931, seem to have emerged without serious problems, but not Ziehl. Seven weeks after the terrorist attacks, coughing and short of breath, he was told by a doctor, “Get into a hospital. You’ve got lung disease.” Ziehl says with a shrug, “Nobody in our tunnel crew was wearing a mask all that time. Who knew?” Alarmed by his test results, doctors ordered him to rest at home. Wherever he went, the cord from his oxygen tank trailed along.

Test after test followed, as did a steady intake of steroids and other drugs. Although they were covered, he soon lost his income. His desperation went beyond financial: “If I didn’t live, what would happen to my mother?”

His health gradually improved, and afraid he’d lose his job altogether if he stayed away longer, he eventually resumed work, placing his mother in a nursing home in order to do so. A final injury: Ziehl received no pension credit for the two years he was disabled.



LEFT: Robert Ziehl, Local 1931, an assistant bridge and tunnel maintainer, inhaled pollutants as Ground Zero vehicles passed by.

RIGHT: Respiratory problems plague William Gleason, EMS lieutenant, Local 3621.

'I've Been to 87 Funerals'

Because he's a friendly guy who has put on magic shows for workers around the city, **Bill Gleason** has paid a stunning psychological price for 9/11: "I knew 141 people who got killed that day, and I've been to 87 of their funerals." He worries, with reason, that his own funeral might be number 88.

Gleason worked in the thick of things from Sept. 11 through 14, and kept returning to Ground Zero for weeks. After only a day, he couldn't breathe through his nose. Did he worry? "Nah. I told myself, 'With all this going on, I don't have the right to complain.'" Yet not long after came respiratory disease and — medically connected, experts said — appendicitis. Then came a sinus emergency. In each case, he had surgery and returned to work after a three-week recovery. But the cumulative damage was grave: An exam revealed a 28–30 percent decrease in pulmonary function.

Still Gleason reported for duty. "I couldn't say no. I had buried so many of my friends, and so many other people were missing." March 2004 brought a massive asthma attack. Doctors told him to put in for retirement, and when the attacks continued, he did so. Retired now for more than two years, he gets to spend more time with his family and work with a Boy Scout troop. Each day, however, he suffers through several asthma

attacks; and each month, his meds and anti-asthma shots cost a staggering \$7,000.

Although his insurance company pays those bills, it doesn't always pay on time, subjecting him to harassment from collection agencies.

"They say all this has cost us at least 12 years of our lives," muses the 46-year-old Gleason. "I figure I won't see 70." **PE**