

# WTC Panel Recommends Adding 30+ Cancers For 'Zadroga' Coverage

By SARAH DORSEY | Posted: Monday, April 9, 2012 5:00 pm

It's not the law yet, but they're one step closer.

A government advisory panel officially recommended March 31 that more than 30 cancers be included under the Zadroga Law, which covers medical care for those exposed to the toxic dust on 9/11.

The World Trade Center Health Program Scientific Technical Advisory Committee—known as the STAC panel—voted to include nearly all the cancers it had discussed a week earlier in a draft report, including those of the respiratory, digestive and urinary tracts, mesothelioma (which is associated with asbestos exposure), skin, breast, thyroid, eye and blood cancers, as well as childhood and rare cancers.

The committee left brain, prostate and pancreatic cancer off the list, citing insufficient scientific evidence. Dr. John Howard, the program administrator, now has 60 days to make a final decision.

## 'More Than We Expected'

"It actually was pretty amazing; that's not what we thought [they'd recommend] at the beginning," said Micki Siegel de Hernandez, director of the Health and Safety Program for Communications Workers of America District 1. While she and her union want all cancers to be covered, she said that "based on how hard the fight has been for every aspect of this program," she was pleased with the result.

Some panel members agreed that all cancers should be included.

"In some of the epidemiological evidence...there are limitations, and that's one of the reasons the panel was divided," Ms. Siegel de Hernandez said, with some members favoring universal coverage.

"Especially when you're looking at rare cancers, you may not actually have enough people to see a change in rates," she explained. Other victims aren't being studied at all.

"People [who have cancer] are not in the programs, because the programs don't cover cancer," she said. "These are reasons why many of us feel that there's an undercount and there will continue to be an undercount."

She said the three excluded types may still make the list later, when more evidence comes in.

## Unions Say More Fighting Ahead

The Zadroga Law, which President Obama signed in Dec. 2010, provided \$1.5 billion for five years of medical coverage. It also reopened the Victims' Compensation Fund, with \$2.8 billion to cover

the expenses of those who became ill or died. If cancer is included, both of those funds will be stretched among more recipients.

But Ms. Siegel de Hernandez said activists are planning to push for more money.

"I don't think there was anyone who was fighting for this who doesn't believe we'll be back fighting for more," she said. "We're going to have to. This health program needs to continue."

U.S. Senators Kirsten Gillibrand and Charles Schumer and House members Carolyn Maloney, Jerrold Nadler and Peter King issued a joint statement praising the panel's decision and requesting a meeting with Health and Human Services Secretary Kathleen Sebelius to discuss implementation.

"This is solid progress for all those sick and struggling with care," they wrote. "Scientific evidence finally has caught up with what we've long known—that the toxins from the collapse of the World Trade Center towers are linked directly to increased cancer rates among 9/11 responders and survivors."

If Dr. Howard approves the panel's recommendation, it could still be a while before cancer sufferers actually receive benefits. After he makes his decision, a 30-day public-comment period will follow and then decisions must be made about how to administer the expanded program. Registration for the World Trade Center Health Program will re-open to accommodate those with cancer who are not currently enrolled.

"A great country would never leave their wounded or dead on the battlefield," said Uniformed Fire Officers Association President Alexander Hagan. "We hope that those who fought the Battle of the WTC in the War on Terrorism will not be abandoned by our government. We look forward to Dr. Howard making a wise and fair decision."