

School Safety Agent Among Post-9/11 Casualties Being Forced to Leave Jobs

By Sarah Dorsey | Posted: Monday, September 21, 2015 5:15 pm

If Daisy Bonilla had contracted just one chronic illness working near the ruins of the World Trade Center after September 11, it would have been hard enough. In reality, it's fatiguing just reading through her extensive list of ailments.

"I have sleep apnea and I have chronic rhinitis," the NYPD School Safety Agent, 47, told researchers at the New York Committee for Occupational Safety & Health. "I have gastroesophageal reflux disease, GERD—acid reflux—real bad. The GERD has affected my gastrointestinal system so much that I have limited and weak peristaltic function now. I have chronic sinusitis, PTSD, and obstructive-airway disease. I have Systemic Lupus Erythematosus, an autoimmune disease that also results in anti-phospholipid syndrome, which is excessive blood-clotting. I have a lot of inflammation and a lot of pain in my joints. I don't sleep well at night."

Multiple Ailments Common

Ms. Bonilla's story isn't unusual. Two-thirds of those with a certified Sept. 11-related illness or injury have two or more conditions. Nearly 4,200 cancers have already been detected, and more than 33,000 people receive Zadroga Act benefits for 9/11 illness.

Along with seven other sick responders and survivors of the Trade Center attacks, Ms. Bonilla shared her experiences in the NYCOSH report "Health and Hardship: Stories from 9/11's Unsung Heroes."

She began patrolling the area around William St. and Fulton St. on Sept. 12, when debris was still raining down, irritating her skin and causing intense itching. She wasn't given a mask.



'GOT SHORT END OF THE STICK'

'GOT SHORT END OF THE STICK': School Safety Agent Daisy Bonilla suffers from a long list of physical ailments that resulted from her working near the ruins of the World Trade Center in the wake of 9/11 without being given protective equipment. 'I take a lot of pain medication, but it doesn't stop,' she said.

For months, she continued to put in overtime downtown near the site, checking in at Red Cross stations and schools to see if anything was needed.

Asthma Recurred

The skin problems continued, and she later developed asthma, which she hadn't had since she was a child. She has filed for retirement, unable to work because of her chronic muscular pain. She has also had surgery for polyps on her vocal cords.

"I can walk a block and a half, but I have to stop because I get pins and needles, a burning sensation, and it feels like my skin is ripping off," Ms. Bonilla said. "I take a lot of pain medication, but it doesn't stop."

Liam Lynch, NYCOSH Program Coordinator for the World Trade Center Health Program, authored the report. It noted that many survivors like Ms. Bonilla suffer from conditions that are not yet covered under that Federal program, which is funded under the 2011 Zadroga Act.

Ms. Bonilla said in interviews with the non-profit that she is retiring nearly five years early due to her conditions.

"So I got the short end of the stick," she said. "It helps that the program covers a few of my conditions."

But many of her musculoskeletal and other ailments—including lupus, a serious autoimmune disorder—are not yet covered by the program's free lifetime medical care.

'Hard to Tell Them'

"When responders come to the clinic, one of the hardest things I often have to do is tell them that I can't do anything for them because of the current regulations on certified musculoskeletal injuries," Dr. Michael Crane told NYCOSH. Dr. Crane, an occupational and preventative medicine specialist, is the medical director of the Mt. Sinai Clinical Center of Excellence, a WTC Health Program clinic.

Program Administrator Dr. John Howard approves new conditions, after reviewing research examining whether various ailments can be linked to the toxic dust unleashed in the attacks. Since 2012, he has permitted dozens of cancers to be covered, and on Sept. 11, 2015, he proposed adding two new ailments to the list: new-onset chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD) and acute traumatic injury.

The proposal would cover the lingering effects of trauma, such as peripheral neuropathy caused by burns and chronic back pain from fractures. The plan will be subject to a 45-day public comment period before Dr. Howard makes a decision.

Two Cops' Maladies

The NYCOSH report relates the experiences of other city workers, including 49-year-old Police Officer Richard Dixon, who has chronic sinusitis, sleep apnea and GERD, and 56-year-old retired cop Paul Gerasimczyk.

Mr. Gerasimczyk was diagnosed with a litany of serious illnesses, including a kidney tumor. At the Mt. Sinai clinic, he has begun group meditation classes, which help him let go of his lingering negative thoughts.

Advocates traveled to Washington last week to press for the renewal of the Zadroga Act, which is due to expire by this time next year.

Dr. Crane said in the report that many questions remain about the health effects of Sept. 11. He fears that the dust from the Towers—full of carcinogens and other toxins—could affect people like asbestos, which Dr. Irving Selikoff in the 1960s demonstrated could cause cancer 40 years after exposure.

“There’s a lurking concern among many of us that we don’t yet have the whole story about lung disease in this population,” he said. “We keep hearing ‘I can’t catch my breath,’ or ‘I’m winded,’ but the nagging concern is there that this other type of illness that we’re not really prepared for yet may emerge in this population. It’s really one of the reasons why we need to watch these patients long-term, and it is really one of the reasons why the Zadroga Act really has to be reauthorized so we can keep an eye on this going forward.”