

**WHILE COPS
AND FEDERAL OFFICIALS
WERE PROPERLY MASKED ...**

City workers didn't get respirators

■ **State probing health practices at landfill, where workers say the lack of safety equipment early in WTC clean-up has left them with health problems**

By **DIANA YATES**
ADVANCE STAFF WRITER

Police detectives and federal agents wore respirators their first day at Fresh Kills landfill, but some city workers said they handled World Trade Center debris for weeks without proper safety gear. A few have developed chronic coughs and other respiratory ailments similar to those reported by workers at Ground Zero, spurring a state investigation into the matter.

A number of workers, who spoke on condition of anonymity, said they moved tens of thousands of tons of material for more than a month after the Sept. 11 disaster with nothing more than simple dust masks for respiratory protection.

Government officials knew in September that the debris contained asbestos and other potentially hazardous materials. A police spokesman said detectives at Fresh Kills got respirators their first day on the job.

Sanitation workers and heavy equipment operators said they were finally given respirators in late October, nearly six weeks after the Twin Towers debris began going to the landfill.

Spurred by complaints from city workers, the state Department of Labor began an inquiry into health and safety practices at Fresh Kills last November. The investigation will be completed within a month, said a Labor Department spokeswoman. She would not disclose who made the complaints.

The Sanitation workers who spoke with the Advance complained of chronic coughs, shortness of breath and other respiratory problems. All said they were experiencing these symptoms for the first time in their lives.

"We are all so upset," said one man, "that I can tell you litigation is going to come out of this."

The Department of Sanitation did not respond to calls seeking comment.

The workers also maintain those monitoring their exposure to asbestos and other health-endangering substances are manipulating the data. When early tests showed some workers had been

exposed to high levels of asbestos or heavy metals, the monitors were quickly moved to more sanitary locales, they charge.

Some workers said safety equipment is still difficult to come by, requiring a trek across the contaminated, 175-acre work area to a supply tent, where the best materials are often reserved for city detectives and federal agents.

One worker said those who dole out supplies first ask what agency the person represents. If you work for Sanitation, he charged, you often walk away empty handed. Besides, he said, walking across a contaminated site to get safety gear "kind of defeats the purpose."

Even a police detective called the Advance last November to complain that it was often difficult to get needed supplies like work boots.

"The people that work there, unfortunately, aren't getting half the things they need," he said.

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Students Return to Two Elementary Schools Shut Down After Terror Attack

By ANEMONA HARTOCOLLIS

On Friday, Brook Peters and his mother, Michelle, walked through Public School 150 for the first time since Sept. 11, just to see what it would be like.

As they walked down Greenwich Street, mother and son looked at the empty space in the sky once filled by twin towers where so many people, many of them firefighters, had died.

"Mom, I feel happy about the firemen," Brook, a kindergartner, said.

"Why?" his mother asked.

"Because their spirits are in my neighborhood," Brook replied.

Yesterday, Brook and his mother returned for real, as P.S. 150 and P.S. 234, a block apart on Greenwich Street, became the first of three downtown elementary schools evacuated on Sept. 11 to reopen. Walking under an arch of helium balloons to the festive beat of conga drums, Ms. Peters said they were thrilled to be back, and Brook seemed to care only about his friends.

But their happy reaction was one of many emotions, from anger among parents who had fought hard not to return, to ambivalence among others, even those who felt that it was right to return to a deeply scarred neighborhood and a school they see in their nightmares. Many parents brought cameras; others wept.

The children seemed more sanguine than their parents. "My daughter is in pre-k, and even though she

was only here one day, she still thinks of this as her school," said Edna Samuel, whose 4-year-old daughter, Roberta, goes to P.S. 234.

Ms. Samuel said Roberta, wearing long dangly earrings for the homecoming, missed the Borders bookstore at the twin towers more than anything. "She doesn't have this conception that people died," she said.

As Jean-Claude Ribes tried to get a last hug from his daughter, Chantrelle, the third grader scolded: "O.K. You can leave. I'm here. Goodbye."

Since Sept. 11, the 170 students of P.S. 150 have been temporarily housed at P.S. 3 in Greenwich Village, and the 600 students of P.S. 234 were at St. Bernard's, a former Catholic school, also in the Village. The third elementary school near the attack, P.S. 89 in Battery Park City, is scheduled to reopen on Feb. 28. P.S. 89 has the clearest view of the ruins.

Amid the celebration, some parents said they would have liked to stay in their temporary quarters longer. These parents wondered whether their children were being used as guinea pigs by a city and a Board of Education anxious to prove that the neighborhood is safe for schools, commerce, tourism and housing.

"First we were supposed to come back in October, then November, then December, then after Christmas break, now Feb. 4," said Curzon Dobell, the father of a fourth grader at P.S. 150. "Where does that date come from? Why now? Is it to prove

that if the kids are back it must be safe? Is it for the sake of normalcy? Is normalcy of primary importance?"

Still, Mr. Dobell was moved to be back. "It's a real home," he said. "Coming back is like being repatriated."

Perez y Mena, the father of a first grader, said he had returned only because his child did not want to start over in a strange school with no friends. "No one moves kids four blocks from a toxic dump site," Dr. Mena said, meaning the ruins of the World Trade Center. "I think this is to make it seem normal for real estate interests. It has nothing to do with children."

Several families said they had asked for waivers that would let them transfer their children to other schools, but had not been able to find room in schools near them. Kevin Ortiz, a spokesman for the board, said 15 variances had been granted from the three schools, and another 6 to 12 families had not accepted the locations offered to them.

Chancellor Harold O. Levy visited both schools to reassure parents. "This has been a year like no other," Mr. Levy told parents at P.S. 234. "This school has emerged from the ashes of the towers more cohesive, more resolute and more dedicated than ever."

Mr. Levy read a letter praising the teachers, which he said would go in their personnel files.

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Some heavy equipment operators go without protective jumpsuits, the first line of defense against contaminating their clothes. They don't have decontamination work stations like the one up on "the hill" where the detectives sift through the debris. Some say their cars are caked inside with dust from the work site.

"We're getting it in our cars and, God forbid, bringing it home," said a worker stationed at the barge-unloading pad.

"They take care of [the detectives and federal agents] up top and they don't even recognize us at all," he said.

The man said he and the other Sanitation employees at the pad are still working without hard hats, even though cranes and front-end loaders are moving enormous pieces of debris overhead. The machines that scoop the debris out of a contained area are supposed to stop working when the men are near, but they don't, he said.

"There are safety foremen, but they're never around" he said, "Down where we are, it's like we're not even considered part of the operation."

Like hundreds of firefighters and other workers at Ground Zero, several Sanitation workers have developed chronic coughs. One man said he had to take a week off after becoming sick with a sore throat and labored breathing. He continues to cough several times an hour, even though he now wears his respirator on the job.

The detectives on the hill are encased in protective gear. They wear white protective jumpsuits, rubber boots, goggles, respirators and hard hats. Before they can eat, they must remove their outerwear and pass through a decontamination tent, where the grime is scrubbed off their boots.

But Sanitation workers on the site said they get no such protection, even though they are often the first to come in contact with the debris. Though they now have respirators and goggles and most don the white "Tyvek" jumpsuits, some say their supervisors have yet to issue them hard hats or work boots.

Robert Kulick, an area director for the federal Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) said the Army Corps of Engineers developed a site safety and health plan for the operations at Fresh Kills. The plan includes regular tours of the site to check for potential safety problems.

But Kulick said, "We do not have jurisdiction over state and city workers." OSHA oversees only federal and private workers.

The workers at the landfill say safety precautions at the site have always been minimal.

"We've been there for years and now we see the kind of protection other agencies give their workers and it's like a smack in the face," one man said.

But Harry Nespoli, vice president of the Uniformed Sanitationmen's Association (USA), said there are 78 union employees at the landfill, and he hasn't received a single call about problems there.

"The Department of Sanitation has bent over backward to protect their people," he said. "Anything [the workers] needed, anywhere, they got."

According to Nespoli, Sanitation workers got respirators the first day on the job at the recovery site in Manhattan and also at Fresh Kills.

"Every man that wanted it, got it," he said.

Nespoli said he was unaware of the Labor Department investigation.

Every worker interviewed said dust was a chronic problem at Fresh Kills. The debris is kept in piles on the site, as is the powder that remains after it's been sifted through. Police officials, detectives, Sanitation workers, tractor operators, private contractors and even one federal agent said the material was not being kept wet, a process that would prevent it from blowing all over the site. A Sanitation worker said they tried wetting it in the barges for a few days in late 2001, but soon stopped.

A private health inspector said investigators had complained that the moisture was ruining some of the evidence.

The dust was a particular problem in the first few weeks of the operation, when rainfall was scarce and the wind was so strong it sometimes knocked over the portable toilets on the hill, the inspector said.

Another worker, a tractor operator, said the dust is being tracked everywhere.

"It's all over the place," he said. "It's on the roads, it's down around the buildings, it's where the mechanics station is, it's down by the fuel stations, it's all over the whole landfill. You'll see it," he said. "It's white powder. It looks like concrete [dust]."

Chris Marlowe, a health and safety manager for the engineering and environmental consulting firm Camp, Dresser & McKee, said keeping the dust in a pile with no cover violates federal Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) rules.

"The guy who makes concrete in my town has a water sprinkler on a gravel pile [to control the dust]," he said. "Here we have a dust that people are saying contains lead, asbestos, cadmium and mercury allowed to just get into the air."

"The New York Police Department and the EPA are handling this dust as if it is hazardous material," he said. "I would want to know why [the city] thinks it's safe enough for me to take it home."

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GROUND ZERO

