

The New York Times, 5/8/02

E.P.A. to Lead Cleanup Effort Of Homes Close to Ground Zero

Agency Reverses Policy 8 Months After Disaster

By KIRK JOHNSON

The federal Environmental Protection Agency will lead an effort to clean up and test apartments south of Canal Street in Lower Manhattan that were fouled by the dust and ash from the destruction of the World Trade Center, a person who was briefed on the plan said.

The cleanup plan is a sharp reversal in policy by the E.P.A. and the other government agencies that led the environmental response to the disaster. For months, despite criticism from politicians and residents who said that the government was shirking its responsibilities, the agency said indoor spaces were the province of owners and residents, not the government. So most people, if only to get on with their lives, followed that guidance and did the cleanup work themselves or hired others to do so.

Under the new plan, which is to be announced as early as today, any residents south of Canal Street will be able to call an E.P.A. number and have their apartments cleaned — for the first time, or again — at government expense, following guidelines established by the federal Occupational Safety and Health Administration, said the person who had been told of the plan. The apartment's air would then be tested. The plan covers only residential spaces.

At least eight state, federal and city agencies, including the state and city health and environmental agencies, the Federal Emergency Management Agency and the mayor's office, are expected to be involved. It could not be determined last night how responsibilities or costs might be divided, except that the E.P.A. would be in charge.

Dozens of questions swirl around what the policy will mean in practice. How many people will come forward and request a cleanup is perhaps the greatest unknown. How much each apartment may cost to clean is another.

About 20,000 people live within half a mile of the World Trade Center site alone. The American Lung Association has estimated that a professional cleanup typically costs about \$1.50 per square foot, or \$1,500 for a 1,000-square-foot apartment. Estimates for more involved cleanup work range even higher.

Public health experts have said they have little evidence to suggest that many apartments in Lower Manhattan are contaminated with asbestos or other materials that might have blown in through cracks or open windows when the twin towers fell on Sept. 11, or that the spaces have not been adequately cleaned up

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E.P.A. to Lead Indoor Cleanup Near Collapse

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in the intervening months.

Extensive testing of outdoor air in the neighborhoods and business areas downtown has for the most part shown little cause for any long-term health concerns.

But because relatively few indoor spaces have been tested, public health experts and disaster administrators, not to mention residents, also really do not know what the state of indoor air quality is. Some public health experts who had the plans described to them said a central question is whether the new policy, coming nearly eight months after the attack, has already missed its opportunity.

"Our worry is that this proposal is coming too late in the game," said Peter Iwanowicz, director of environmental health at the American Lung Association of New York State. Mr. Iwanowicz said he had no reason to believe that residents should be alarmed by the change in policy. But the fact is, he said, people have not had enough information to assess their own risks, unless they have had the resources and inclination to have

their air tested.

"Rather than doing this in the first couple of months, when it should have been done, people have been living and working in these spaces," Mr. Iwanowicz said.

But one public official who became a particularly sharp critic of the government's response, Representative Jerrold Nadler of New York, said last night that he thought the policy was a huge step forward and should reassure residents that their health and welfare would be taken care of.

"It's good that they're doing this," he said. "We'll watch that they do it right, but it's a major step forward."

A spokeswoman for the E.P.A., Bonnie Bellow, declined to comment last night.

In general, public health experts have divided the population of people who were potentially exposed to contaminants from the trade center into two main groups: those who worked or volunteered at ground zero and everyone else.

Ground zero workers, especially those who did not wear proper respiratory protection, are considered the most exposed because they were in the midst of the dust that blew

around the site and the smoke from the fires that burned for more than three months after the attack.

Physicians who have treated people with respiratory complaints say that although some downtown office workers and residents have had severe reactions — mostly short-term irritation of their lungs and throats — the numbers are relatively low.

One physician who has treated many people with World Trade Center-related illnesses, Dr. Stephen M. Levin of the Mount Sinai School of Medicine, said at a conference last month in Manhattan that he believed that few residents should be alarmed about their increased risk of long-term illness from the disaster.

But in dozens of interviews with residents over the last eight months, questions have continued to resonate about how clean is clean. Among the issues that will probably emerge under the new cleanup policy is whether residents will consider a building clean if only some of the apartments, but not all, participate in the E.P.A. program since dust, as anyone who has ever wielded a broom can attest, tends to move around, tracked from place to place.

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