

Free Tests for Recovery Workers

Program will track long-term health effects

By Margaret Ramirez
STAFF WRITER

In the first effort to track long-term health effects of the World Trade Center collapse, Sen. Hillary Rodham Clinton on Friday announced a \$12 million program that will offer free medical tests for more than 8,000 police officers, rescue workers and volunteers potentially exposed to hazardous substances.

At a news conference in the senator's midtown offices, Clinton said thousands participated in the recovery efforts at Ground Zero and later at the Fresh Kills landfill on Staten Island. Even so, there are only two groups systematically tracking health problems of those exposed workers: the Fire Department and the state government.

The new program, which will be overseen by the Mount Sinai Hospital-Irving J. Selikoff Center for Occupational Medicine, will provide an estimated 8,500 free medical examinations at five occupational medicine centers in the New York region and several other clinics nationwide.

"We know that there have been health consequences for those workers and volunteers on the pile," Clinton said. "By arming ourselves with the facts now, we can do a better job of protecting workers' health in the future."

Dr. Stephen Levin, medical director of the Mount Sinai occupational health center, said his staff had seen hundreds

with persistent respiratory symptoms most likely resulting from inhaling pulverized concrete and fiberglass Sept. 11.

"We've seen workers and volunteers whose lives are still shaken by the psychological symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder and significant depression," Levin said. "What we don't know is what the long-term health consequences for these workers might be."

Levin said that within a week the hospital would establish a toll-free number for those seeking examinations. Calls will be screened based on exposure to dust and debris, and those at greatest risk will be scheduled first, he said.

Although gathering information is the focus of the project, Levin said there is a more important goal.

"It's not just a research project. It's making sure that people who need medical care will get it," Levin said.

Tom Scotto, president of the Detective's Endowment Association, said he was pleased that a medical program had been established for the hundreds of police officers who worked at Ground Zero.

Scotto also expressed concern for officers working at the Fresh Kills landfill, where Ground Zero debris is taken.

"There are 500 New York City detectives, every day, 24 hours a day, at the Staten Island landfill," Scotto said. "And in many cases, people will tell you that exposure was far greater than the World Trade Center."

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Despite such reports, federal and city agencies issued only one citation for improper cleaning. Respirators, and other safety gear and procedures, are required under federal regulations governing work with asbestos-containing material; asbestos abatement can cost three to four times more than a standard cleaning job.

The federal Occupational Safety and Health Administration, which is charged with ensuring worker safety, selected 34 buildings around the trade center site in January for random inspection after receiving complaints about dangerous work conditions.

The first inspections did not occur until up to 10 weeks after many day laborers stopped working — and as late as last month about a half-dozen buildings had yet to be inspected.

OSHA gave employers advance notice of the inspections, which officials said is standard practice. No asbestos violations were found.

Under city regulations, New York's Department of Environmental Protection is required to ensure that asbestos workers, their clothing and equipment are decontaminated so asbestos fibers do not escape from work sites.

Union officials repeatedly told the department that non-union laborers weren't using proper gear or procedures, said Sal Speziale, president of Laborers Local 78, which represents 3,200 hazardous-materials workers.

Speziale claims that inspectors did little to crack down on violations.

"It seemed like they didn't do nothing to rectify the situation," he said.

Thirty-seven asbestos projects were registered with the department in lower Manhattan after Sept. 11, and it received more than 170 asbestos-related complaints. Charles Sturcken, the department's chief of staff, said inspectors found only one violation — a failure to properly register a project that was otherwise safely carried out.

"If there's a complaint about asbestos, we'll look into it," Sturcken said. "If we don't catch them, we don't catch them. That's unfortunate."

Workers examined

Between Jan. 14 and Feb. 25, the Queens College medical team examined 410 immigrant workers from Ecuador, Colombia, Peru and the Dominican Republic. Its findings are expected in June.

Nearly all were suffering from two groups of symptoms: a combination of upper airway irritation, coughing, sore throat, chest discomfort and nasal congestion; and a cluster consisting of headaches, insomnia, poor appetite and dizziness, Markowitz said.

Perhaps one or two of every thousand workers who cleaned buildings without proper protection could develop mesothelioma, a rare cancer affecting the sac lining of the chest or abdomen, said Levin, of the Mount Sinai School of Medicine.

Levin said he based his estimate on construction workers such as plumbers and electricians, whose mesothelioma rates have generally run below 1 in 1,000.

Cancers linked to asbestos almost certainly would not appear for decades. That workers had symptoms weeks after they stopped working indicates health problems beyond simple irritation from inhaling the dust, Markowitz said.

High concentrations of pulverized glass or fiberglass certainly could have harmed workers' respiratory systems, Markowitz said. Alkaline dust dissolving in the water and mucus of the airways also could have been caustic enough to cause damage, he said.

"I'm at a loss, really, to explain why people had those symptoms," Markowitz said.

"I say the dust was toxic because we have human proof."

Ground....

up material that's more than 1 percent asbestos. As much as 35 percent of the dust may have contained that much, but labor groups charge that enforcement of the rules was lax, and federal officials acknowledge that it was a low priority.

Now, after months of saying that indoor cleaning was landlords' and residents' responsibility, federal and local agencies have reversed course. The Environmental Protection Agency and city Environmental Protection Department announced May 8 they will spend federal funds to professionally clean the apartment of any resident who requests it.

Asbestos on pipes

The Port Authority of New York and New Jersey, which owns the trade center, was about halfway through a multi-million-dollar asbestos-removal project when the twin towers were attacked. Both towers had asbestos fireproofing on heating pipes, interior spaces and the support columns behind their distinctive metal cladding, Port Authority spokesman Allen Morrison said.

Public agencies have tested thousands of dust samples taken in lower Manhattan since Sept. 11.

Up to 35 percent of the samples tested by the EPA had enough asbestos fibers to require professional cleaning and the use of respirators. Tests conducted for the city found those levels of asbestos in only 6 percent of the samples.

As recently as last month, private and public tests still detected asbestos in some lower Manhattan buildings.

Tests by a New York University team also found minimal levels of chromium, dioxin, lead, nickel and polychlorinated biphenyls, or PCBs.

The U.S. Geological Survey found that the dust could be caustic when mixed with water, apparently because of a substance in concrete. And tests conducted for the city health department found fiberglass, a possible carcinogen, in nearly half of the samples.

Risks downplayed?

Labor groups, environmentalists and downtown residents say that federal and local agencies downplayed potential risks posed by the dust, leaving residents confused.

On Sept. 13, the EPA issued a statement that said: "Sampling of bulk materials and dust found generally low levels of asbestos ... the general public should be very reassured by initial sampling."

But EPA officials say they also warned residents and cleaning companies that they should presume the dust had asbestos levels high enough to require professional contractors with respirators to clean up heavy deposits.

"We knew that there was asbestos in the dust and the recommendation was to use professional abatement contractors," agency spokeswoman Bonnie Bellow said.

"I never heard EPA say that," said Jessica Leighton, assistant commissioner of the New York City Department of Health. "It was not the assumption we're working under."

Instead, the city health department said as early as Sept. 17 that residents could clean their own apartments using wet rags, mops and high-efficiency vacuum cleaners.

Leighton said that recommendation applied only to buildings where landlords had not detected enough asbestos to require professional cleaning.

But that qualification wasn't mentioned on many health department press releases and fliers posted on downtown buildings. And the distinction was lost on many residents, who cleaned heavy dust deposits in buildings that hadn't been tested, said Madelyn Wils, chairwoman of lower Manhattan's community board.

"At the time when people were starting to get back into their homes, it was unclear," she said. "There was no leadership from the city, state or federal government on this."

Artist Nancy Manter said she is recovering from pneumonia she developed after cleaning inches of dust from her apartment two blocks from Ground Zero.

"Cancer, of course, is a huge concern," she said. "You feel like you're not being told the truth."

Volunteers at risk

Around Thanksgiving, more than 1,000 Southern Baptist volunteers cleaned apartments around Battery Park City through a program that sends volunteers to disaster areas.

The city Office of Emergency Management coordinated their efforts and the health department provided volunteers with high-efficiency vacuum cleaners and the assurance that the dust was largely safe, Baptist and health department officials said.

Many volunteers labored in paper masks considered inadequate for work with asbestos. Some had respirators that tightly sealed over the nose and mouth and purified air using a high-efficiency filter, but they were used sporadically or not at all, volunteers and Baptist officials said.

"I wore mine the first hour or so, but then it got too hot and kind of hard to talk," said Donald Kimbell, a 51-year-old retired police officer from Ruston, La. "Most folks that were in there didn't wear 'em."

Meanwhile, day laborers — as many as 5,000 by some estimates — cleaned dust from downtown apartments for as long as 10 weeks running, said Dr. Steven Markowitz, director of the Queens College Center for the Biology of Natural Systems.

Most workers said employers did not provide respirators, said Markowitz, who operated a mobile exam room for workers near Ground Zero. Some workers said they brought their own respirators but were prevented from using them, he said.

"The employers would tell them not to use the respirators because it would alarm the other workers," Markowitz said.

One Polish-born worker said respirators were used inconsistently in buildings around Ground Zero.

"Some people wear it, some people not, nobody checking," said the worker, a certified asbestos handler who asked to remain anonymous for fear of angering potential employers. "You should be wearing it in every room. Nobody tells us how much asbestos inside."

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Ground Zero workers aren't breathing easier

**Hundreds of laborers and volunteers cleaned
potentially hazardous trade center dust
without standard protections**

**By MICHAEL WEISSENSTEIN
and MALCOLM RITTER**
ASSOCIATED PRESS

From Latin American day laborers to Southern Baptist volunteers, hundreds of people cleaned potentially hazardous dust from buildings around the World Trade Center site without standard safety gear.

The cleanup continued for months after Sept. 11 as public agencies issued confusing and often reassuring assessments of risks posed by the dust, according to public documents and dozens of interviews.

Asbestos, glass particles and caustic powder settled unevenly in scores of apartment and office buildings when the twin towers collapsed and sent dust clouds rolling through lower Manhattan, public and private tests show.

But while some public officials said it should be assumed the dust contained asbestos and required professional cleaning, others said it could be safely removed with wet rags, mops and vacuum cleaners.

In the weeks and months that

followed, air-filtering respirators were used sporadically or not at all by many volunteers, immigrant laborers and residents who cleaned up the dust.

More than 400 laborers have reported dizziness, coughing and other maladies months after stopping work, according to a medical team's study of their health problems, the most extensive such survey to date. Some scientists say the workers also face an elevated, if still relatively low, risk of asbestos-related cancer in coming decades.

Any such illness, they say, would have been entirely preventable.

"It's a public health outrage they were allowed to be exposed in this way," said Dr. Stephen Levin, medical director of the Irving J. Selikoff Center for Occupational and Environmental Medicine at the Mount Sinai School of Medicine.

Local and federal rules require elaborate safety procedures and respirators for workers cleaning

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