

Testimony of Kevin Mount

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Thank you for allowing me the opportunity to speak on behalf of injured and disabled 9/11 workers and to address the need for continuation of the World Trade Center Medical Monitoring and Treatment Program.

I began working as a heavy equipment operator for the City of NY Sanitation Department in 1980 and worked primarily at the Fresh Kill landfill in Staten Island. When the World Trade Center was attacked, I was 47 years old and just a few years away from enjoying my retirement. Just prior to the attack, I had had a complete physical with blood work and was found to be in excellent health. I was physically fit and enjoyed participating in a number of sports primarily with my two sons who were 19 and 20 years old at the time.

On September 11, 2001, after the twin towers collapsed, I was asked to participate in the rescue and recovery efforts at Ground Zero. It was with a profound sense of patriotism and compassion for the thousands of victims and their families that I immediately agreed to help in whatever way I could. Needless to say, the task was monumental. I arrived at Ground Zero on September 12th. The amount of destruction caused by this brutal attack was overwhelming. In addition to the collapse of the two World Trade Center towers, numerous other buildings at the site were destroyed or badly damaged. The streets appeared war torn with tons of debris spread as far as I could see. The air was thick with caustic dust and the smoke from the surrounding fires made breathing very difficult. Although there has been much speculation regarding the availability of respirators and other haz mat gear, I was offered nothing more than a paper dust mask. I worked 14 hour shifts, 7 days a week. The "state of the art" Decontamination Tent built on the site was used strictly by privileged workers, never by anyone from my department. The dust that covered us while we worked, came home with us at the end of each shift.

My primary responsibility while at Ground Zero, was to remove debris that had been hand searched by other first responders and transport it several blocks away where it was eventually shipped by barges and trucks to the Staten Island Landfill. Two weeks after the attack, I and my co-workers were transferred from Ground Zero to the Fresh Kill landfill to continue with the search and recovery operation. I had expected the work conditions to be improved from Ground Zero, but in actuality, they were much worse. 1.4 million tons of WTC debris was processed at the landfill at the rate of approximately 5,000 tons per day. The air was so thick with concrete dust and other particles that there were times I couldn't see more than a couple of feet in front of me. Despite requests for protective gear, I continued to work with nothing more than a paper dust mask.

On October 26, forty five days after the attack, the heavy equipment operators were issued respirators. By this time, I and most of my co-workers were already sick with continuous coughing, sinus problems, gastric problems, nose bleeds, etc. I continued to

work 12 hour shifts, 7 days a week. My first day off was Thanksgiving, 72 days after the collapse of the WTC. If I'm not mistaken, my second day off was Christmas. While at the landfill, I was assigned to work in a restricted area spreading the debris from Building 7. Once it was spread, workers from different city, state and federal agencies would sift through it for evidence, personnel property, etc. When they were done sifting and searching, the layer of debris was removed and another layer was spread. Before its' collapse, Building 7 had been used as a temporary morgue and included in the debris were numerous body parts. The machine I had been assigned to work with had been at Ground Zero since 9/11 and was covered inside and out with "dust." It was an old machine and not equipped with the proper air filtration system and it was neither cleaned nor decontaminated before I began using it.

Although I had been coughing since sometime in September, I had begun to feel extremely sick. I suffered with intense weakness, fatigue, headaches, shortness of breath and difficulty breathing. The cough became relentless. On February 19, 2002, I was brought to the emergency room of our local hospital and was admitted with difficulty breathing, extreme fatigue, a burning sensation in my trachea and a temperature of 103. I was treated with IV antibiotics and steroids and received daily lung treatments. I was diagnosed with Asthma, acute Hepatitis C and sinusitis. The discomfort in my trachea was determined to be burns from the caustic material I had been inhaling. I remained in the hospital for 5 days and left knowing that my life would never be the same. I knew I was too sick to continue working and that my dreams for the future had been irrevocably changed.

When I returned home from the hospital, my life was in turmoil. I had just been diagnosed with major health problems and had to find a way to accept it. It wasn't easy. For the first time in my life I had to rely on daily medication and inhalers to breathe. I was inundated with doctor appointments, lab appointments, test appointments, etc.

Adding to my problems, my sinuses were impacted due to the heavy volume of dust I had been breathing. The pressure from the impacted sinuses caused my left eardrum to collapse, leaving me with diminished hearing and a constant ringing in my ear. I became distraught with the knowledge that had protective equipment been afforded me, I would have still been in good health. I started feeling depressed and later became filled with rage. I now suffered from psychological trauma which, to this day, I continue to take medication for.

Initially, I placed my health problems in the hands of local specialists. Although they were competent physicians and leaders in their fields, they had no idea how my involvement in the aftermath of 9/11 could have caused such major health problems. They had no knowledge of the toxins released into the air at the collapse of the towers and were unable to adequately answer my questions. I began to feel like a lab experiment and that my care was based on trial and error. Medication was changed on a regular basis and there was no coordination of care amongst the doctors. The right hand never knew what the left hand was doing. It was truly disconcerting.

Sometime in early March, my wife testified on my behalf at a hearing held by Congressman Nadler and listened to the testimony given by Dr. Steven Levin, chairman of The World Trade Center Medical Monitoring and Treatment Program. She spoke with him regarding my condition and he agreed to see me. I thank God every day for his presence in my life. If not for his care, his guidance and his genuine concern for my well being, I don't know where I'd be today. He not only treated my pulmonary and gastric problems, he referred me to several doctors within the program who addressed my other needs.

For the first time since I had become ill, there was a coordination of health care amongst my health care professionals. Dr. Levin also referred me to doctors outside the program who treated my ear and liver problems. I am happy to say that after an 18 month course of interferon injections, I am free of Hepatitis C. Unfortunately, I was not so lucky with the ear problem. After 2 surgeries, I still have limited hearing and constant ringing in my left ear. I've also had sinus surgery to clear my sinuses and to diminish the headaches. Although I still have headaches and sinus infections, they are much less frequent.

The World Trade Center Medical Monitoring Program has been a lifeline to the many thousands of responders who now suffer as a result of their commitment to their jobs, their fellow man and their country. I don't think there is a person in this room who knows what the future holds for those of us who experienced prolong exposure to the multitude of air born toxins released when the buildings collapsed. Needless to say, we must now consider how many of us were exposed to asbestos. The result of exposure to this toxin is deadly with symptoms not appearing for up to 10 or 20 years after exposure. For this reason alone, the program must be funded to allow its' continuance. There were countless mistakes made in the aftermath of this attack. Monitoring and tracking the health of the responders is crucial in preparing for a future emergency response should another attack occur. Allowing this program to fall by the wayside would only add to the list of mistakes made in the aftermath of 9/11.

In closing, I would like to state that not all the workers who responded to this emergency reside in the NYC area. There were thousands of workers who lived outside of NY and came to Ground Zero to help in any way they could. Unfortunately, the program is not available to them unless they spend a considerable amount of time and money traveling back and forth to NY. These workers were heroes who went above and beyond the call of duty and should not be penalized for their sacrifices. And lastly, there are those of us who have been forced to retire due to injuries sustained and have had to consider moving out of state. I was born and raised in NY and due to the difficulty I now have breathing in cold weather and the problems associated with air pollution, I have moved to southwest Florida.

Although I have researched available specialists in my area, there don't seem to be any who specialize in environmental occupational medicine. As a result, I travel four times a year to be seen by Dr. Levin and Dr. Malikoff. A national program would afford retirees like me who have been forced to consider moving to a warmer climate to

continue being monitored and treated by professionals such as those involved in this very worthwhile program.

Thank you.