

**Testimony**

**Before  
The United States House of Representatives**

**Committee on Education and Labor**

**Hearing on  
*Why Weren't World Trade Center  
Rescue and Recovery Workers Protected?***

**Washington, D.C.  
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**Presented By  
Freddy Cordero**

Good morning. My name is Freddy Cordero. I want to thank Chairman Miller and the members of the Committee for the opportunity to speak to you today.

I was a school fireman for the New York City Board of Education for over 21 years, and I have been a member of Local 94 of the International Union of Operating Engineers for over 15 years. I also have an extensive background in safety. I have an asbestos handler's certificate, and other safety certificates that were needed for my work.

On September 12<sup>th</sup>, 2001, I was called by the Custodians Union to see if I was willing to leave my regular school assignment in northern Manhattan and work to support the rescue and recovery efforts at and near the World Trade Center site starting the next day. As a lifelong citizen of New York, I wanted to serve my city and my country however I could.

We assembled a team of cleaners, engineers, and firemen, and joined other Board of Education workers on a bus provided by the City to go to perform

work at the WTC site. We were only asked to bring as many buckets as we could carry.

When we got there on September 13th, we were assigned to work on the bucket brigade on the Pile at Ground Zero. I'm sure you've all seen video of the pit that horrible first day.

The next day, September 14<sup>th</sup>, our assignment was to clean up the three public schools within the World Trade Center area. These included PS 234, PS 89, and Stuyvesant High School, all within blocks of the site. The schools were going to be shelters for the many men and women doing the rescue and recovery work. When we arrived at the schools, they were covered with World Trade Center dust, and very smoky from the fires that were burning nearby.

Our job was to make each school clean enough so that the workers and volunteers would have a place to eat and sleep.

In all, I worked both as an employee and volunteer for one month. When I left the bucket brigade after two days, I continued to work as a volunteer at the schools beyond my paid shift.

Though I owned my own respirator, I didn't take it with me that first day. To be honest, I forgot it. On the following days, I couldn't get back to my usual school to get it. But I also assumed that there would be masks available for the rescue and recovery teams working in lower Manhattan.

Both on the 13<sup>th</sup> on the bucket brigade and on the 14<sup>th</sup> in the schools, the only masks provided were paper masks. I wore my mask and changed it frequently as it got clogged and dirty. At the end of each day, when I threw out the last mask and blew my nose, I was amazed at the amount of black soot that I had breathed in. A few days later, we were given the regular half-face masks with cartridges. I think it was my union that made sure that we had these respirators.

Everyone I worked with from the Board of Education had the same respirators once they were available. It was our responsibility to get new

cartridges as needed. There were a lot of people around those first days. I can't say for sure whether anyone from OSHA or PESH was there.

One of the things that concerned me is that I was going home covered in toxic dust to my wife and my 3-year old son. By September 15<sup>th</sup> or 16<sup>th</sup>, I took matters into my own hands and brought four or five disposable suits. I did not want to endanger my family with the dust. I continued to use them, and the face mask with cartridges, until I left the Ground Zero area.

In spite of everything I did, my health has suffered greatly from my work after 9/11. Within about 3 days, my family noticed that I had a dry cough that many people now call World Trade Center cough. My family doctor prescribed a few medications, but they didn't really help that much.

In 2003, I began getting treatment at Mount Sinai's World Trade Center Medical Screening and Treatment Program. They have been treating me a few times a month for five years. They have diagnosed me with scarring of the lungs, asthma, post-nasal drip, and other respiratory ailments. They have also diagnosed a narrowing of the esophagus, and reflux disease. I now take at least 5 or 6 medications regularly. I've been taking them for the past five

years. I don't know what I would've done without the Medical Screening and Treatment Program at Mount Sinai.

Prior to 9/11, I was extremely healthy, an avid swimmer, and never had to take any medicine. My pulmonologist has told me that the reason I am still around is that I was never a smoker, but that I have the lungs of an 80-year old.

And it is not just me. Of my team of 26 men that I worked with, I believe 11 are also suffering some illnesses.

I consider myself fortunate. With the help of my family, my caregivers at Mount Sinai, and the support of my new employer, I am able to lead a happy and productive life. I was not, however, able to stay employed in the Board of Education job that I loved. The chemicals, boilers, and other hazardous exposures stopped me from staying there. I am now fortunate enough to have a part-time job in a senior citizen facility that allows me to continue supporting my family without exposing myself to hazards. I took a large financial cut to take this job, but I am grateful to have it.

I know my time is up, but I am happy to answer any questions you may have about my work at the WTC site, the wonderful care I got at Mount Sinai, or my ordeal with Workers' Compensation, which took five years to settle as the different parties argued about their responsibility. Thank you for your interest and for your support of the 9/11 rescue, recovery, and clean-up workers.