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Responding to the World Trade Center: Ten Years Out and Counting

Editorial
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Like most workers who tend directly to the needs of the public, firefighters and paramedics bear witness to the very worst and very best of human behavior. Every day, we see that human beings, while capable of inflicting violence, indifference, and cruelty on one another, are also—and perhaps more often than not—capable of demonstrating compassion, of stepping forward and offering themselves *in some way*, in the best way they know how, to another person, a complete stranger, in urgent need of help.

The September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks on the New York World Trade Center (WTC) brought both of these elements of the human condition together in staggering clarity and scale. Incomprehensible violence and loss of life in the space of minutes—including 343 New York City firefighters and 60 police officers—was followed by tens of thousands of acts of compassion over the ensuing weeks and months, as thousands of people stepped forward to do what they could to help.

Ten years later, as we reflect on what happened, let us remember the 3,000 people who lost their lives on September 11, and let us remember the families and communities they left behind. Let us also not forget the lives taken and families and communities broken apart in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Let us also reflect on what we've learned. The attacks of September 11 were the deadliest seen on U.S. soil since World War II; they were also a health and environmental catastrophe of enormous proportions, one that continues to unfold today. Following the WTC attack, over 50,000 workers were exposed at the WTC site, without adequate respiratory protection, to a choking atmosphere of particles and gases that consisted of pulverized building materials, coarse alkaline cement dust, asbestos, glass fibers, lead, polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons (PAHs), polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs), polychlorinated furans and dioxins, and tens of thousands of toxicants in fire smoke. They searched for survivors and recovered bodies, cleared debris, and cleaned surrounding buildings. In 2006, Mt. Sinai Medical Center in New York reported that 25% of all WTC workers seen by the Center were suffering respiratory abnormalities and disabilities.

Firefighters were the most intensely exposed: between 2002 and 2006, some 16,000 sought treatment for WTC-related diseases. Lung function tests of 12,000 New York firefighters showed that those who worked at the WTC site in the first year were suffering lung function losses equivalent to 12 years of work in the New York fire service; they are now retiring with respiratory disabilities at a rate four times higher than normal. This month, the *Lancet* released a study showing that, nine years after the WTC attacks, cancer incidence in WTC-exposed firefighters is 19% higher compared to non-exposed firefighters, and that Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) in WTC-exposed firefighters is 31.9%, compared to 10-20% among military personnel returning from Iraq and Afghanistan who experienced heavy combat.

These data are tragic not only for the story they tell of lives cut short or damaged among those who gave all they could after the WTC attacks, but also for the fact that the great majority might have been prevented. It is now clear that Federal government agencies, the NY City Mayor's Office, the NY Governor's Office, and the mainstream NY media downplayed, or overlooked, serious health risks of WTC air contaminants in the days and weeks following the WTC attack. Detailed reports on high levels of toxic air contaminants were ignored. EPA Inspector General Nikki Tinsley reported in 2003 that after the attack, the White House stepped in and deleted cautionary language and added reassuring statements in EPA public documents, ostensibly to communicate confidence to the public, protect national security concerns, and accelerate the opening of Wall Street.

Firefighters, along with tens of thousands of other workers, were the ones who suffered the most as a consequence. That suffering, and its human and economic toll, will continue to unfold in years to come.

On the tenth anniversary of September 11, 2001, let us reflect on those we lost, let us demand real support and care for those who gave so much, and let us not fear to question official assurances of safety when our instincts and experience tell us otherwise. Let us take steps to build a world in which security is created through both vigilance and compassion.

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