

Ground Zero volunteer urges U.S. to keep monitoring health

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Edwardo Torres' message to Congress on Wednesday was simple: I did my part. You do yours.

The 47-year-old plumber from Jersey City told a House subcommittee that he never worried he would go from a healthy jogger to someone unable to climb stairs without getting winded when "I did my duty" and volunteered at Ground Zero in the days after the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks.

Now that Torres is sick, he thinks the United States should continue the health-monitoring program for people with Ground Zero-related illnesses. The program has been funded on an annual basis, requiring supporters to appear at hearings year after year. A bill before the House health subcommittee would make it permanent and also make some victims eligible for cash compensation.

The hearing drew only four members of Congress, and the lone Republican – Rep. Nathan Deal, R-Ga., questioned the cost, which he said could reach \$1 billion a year. Rep. Frank Pallone, a Long Branch Democrat and chairman of the subcommittee, said the bill would likely advance in the House this spring.

"We're getting pretty close to the point where the bill as drafted can move," Pallone said.

Torres recalled looking at the smoldering ruins across the Hudson River from Liberty State Park the night of 9/11 and telling his girlfriend that he could help find survivors because of his experience at demolition sites.

He called his union hall and the next morning went to Ground Zero, where he got a hard hat and a paper mask and joined police, firefighters and other construction worker volunteers in the "bucket brigade" removing rubble by hand.

He put in 60 hours over four days before paid contractors took over. The last three days he was given a dual-filter respirator instead, but he said workers did not always wear their masks because of a false sense of security, nice weather and a "frenzied dedication to our work." They also removed their masks to eat and drink "on the pile."

The dust was not as visible in the air after the first day, but Torres said he realized how prevalent it was when he washed his face every hour and saw gray film on the paper towel.

"I never had any health problems prior to 9/11," Torres told the subcommittee. "Then, in 2002, I started having stomach pain."

He ignored it, and it got worse. Doctors advised medication for acid reflux. He also found he was getting winded, had difficulty lifting things at work and once while dancing felt "massive chest pain."

A full exam found limited lung function and lung scarring, but there was no explanation why. In the winter of 2005, he missed six or seven days of work "because in the cold weather I simply could not breathe."

In May 2006, the woman who became his wife pressed him to go to Mount Sinai hospital in New York City, where the federally funded health-monitoring program for Ground Zero victims is run. Another center is run by University of Medicine and Dentistry of New Jersey in Piscataway.

Doctors had seen the symptoms in thousands of others exposed to the chemicals, glass and asbestos released when the Twin Towers collapsed. Torres was diagnosed with two World Trade Center-related conditions, gastro-esophageal reflux disorder and a chronic respiratory disorder. A throat specialist found a growth.

"This may sound strange, but that was a very happy moment for me. Because I had an answer about what was happening," Torres told the subcommittee.

The polyp was removed through surgery and was not cancerous. Torres still has chronic respiratory problems and goes to Mount Sinai for CT scans every three months. But he still works.

If the program is discontinued, he will be able to see doctors with his health insurance, but he is not sure the care will be the same because the doctors in the program "put two and two together for me. They were able to give me answers of what was really going on. ..."

Torres said that, had he known what would happen to him, there was "not a doubt in my mind" that he would still volunteer.

"Those people needed me," he said. "My country needed me. I had to do the right thing. I now respectfully ask you to respond to our health needs."

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