



Congress passes Ground Zero health bill

Congress approved a \$4.2 billion spending package Wednesday to aid rescue workers who said they suffered ill health from working at Ground Zero after the Sept. 11, 2001, terror attacks.

The James Zadroga 9/11 Health and Compensation Act was passed by the House of Representatives late Wednesday, hours after New York Democratic Sens. Charles Schumer and Kristen Gillibrand helped negotiate a compromise with Republicans to gain Senate approval.

The Senate passed the bill unanimously, while it was approved 206-60 in the House.

"It should've happened years ago," said George Kielb, a 53-year-old battalion chief in the Yonkers Fire Department and father of three. He said he suffers from respiratory problems and chronic acid reflux from his work at Ground Zero. "Some people have died from this stuff, and other people are going to need major medical treatment for their whole lives.

"Most people say they couldn't do enough for the police and firefighters after 9/11," Kielb said. "But it took years to get to this point. Eventually, you become a political toy."

The measure, named after a New York City police detective who died in 2006 due to ailments linked to Ground Zero, comes after more than 10,000 rescue workers voted last month to settle a class-action lawsuit seeking damages for health problems.

The workers, as well as relatives of others who died as a result of exposure to contaminants at the lower Manhattan site, settled the case for more than \$625 million.

David Worby, a White Plains attorney who represented thousands of rescue workers in that case, said late Wednesday that it was too soon to determine how the final version of the Zadroga Act would impact his clients.

"There's a lot of uncertainty now coming out of Washington as to who is going to be included in the bill," Worby said. "But there is going to be a bill, and that's the good news."

"There are going to be a lot of people who were unable to be helped, like the residents down there and people who weren't part of our action, who are finally going to get some health coverage and some benefits," he added. "So, that's the good news. Exactly who it's going to benefit we don't know yet."

Thousands of workers reported health problems following the weeks of digging at Ground Zero in the wake of the attacks, many complaining they were assured conditions were safe and were only given paper masks to breathe through.

"I tried to go back to work, but I still had problems with the breathing and chest pain from the injuries," said Stony Point resident Robert Reeg, a 58-year-old retired New York City firefighter. Reeg responded to the south tower.

He said he suffered smoke inhalation injuries and severe chest trauma that caused a hemopneumothorax — a buildup of blood and air in the cavities near the lungs.

"It's worrisome," said Reeg, who retired in 2003. "You really don't know what's going to happen down the road because you really don't know what you were subjected to."

The Zadroga Act calls for monitoring illnesses such as Reeg's and examining their causes through a World Trade Center Health Program within the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health.

Costs would be controlled by limiting an existing

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program for first responder medical monitoring to 15,000 new participants and allowing another 15,000 people to enroll in a program for residents and nonresponders.

The legislation also would reopen the 9/11 Victims Compensation Fund, which has been closed since 2003, to compensate collateral victims for economic losses.

"This legislation will provide much-needed funds for medical treatment to the rescue workers and residents of New York City who suffered illnesses from breathing in toxic fumes, dust and smoke from Ground Zero," Gov. David Paterson said in a statement Wednesday.

In a statement released by his office Friday, Assembly Speaker Sheldon Silver, a Manhattan Democrat, said the measure "literally will save lives."

"With the passage of the Zadroga bill," Silver said, "our brave and suffering 9/11 rescue workers and the thousands of downtown residents who are also casualties of the attacks have overcome the primary obstacle in their path to receiving the health care they so desperately need."

Journal News Staff Writer James O'Rourke and Bart Jansen of the Washington Bureau contributed to this report.



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