

06/11/2006

Program will focus on post-9/11 health problems

By Kathryn Gill , Freeman staff

NEW PALTZ - Deadly illnesses and other health problems that have arisen from the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks will be the focus of a free daylong conference Monday at SUNY New Paltz.

The conference begins at 10 a.m. in Room 100 of the campus Lecture Center. It is sponsored by SUNY and The Lower Manhattan Health Project.

Among the presenters will be Dr. Stephen M. Levin, director of the World Trade Center Medical Monitoring Program, and individuals who say they suffer from health problems they developed after the World Trade Center's twin towers were demolished by hijacked airplanes.

Donna Flayhan, a local resident and director of the Lower Manhattan Public Health Project, said the conference is "really important for the public to come to."

Flayhan said smoke and ash that emerged at ground zero during the ninemonth cleanup of the site contained dangerous levels of asbestos and lead cadmium, as well as tiny pieces of glass, all of which have caused health problems and rescue workers, police officers and firefighters.

Though 150,000 respirator masks were distributed and only 40,000 people worked at the site, most either never received masks or didn't use them.

A federal lawsuit has been filed on behalf of the more than 8,000 individuals who claim to have gotten sick at ground zero. David Worby, a lawyer whose firm is representing the plaintiffs, will be among the speakers at Monday's event.

Flayhan says that even though almost five years have passed since the attacks, toxic dust still is circulating around ground zero, getting into ventilation systems and causing continued health problems. And she disputes assurance from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency that the air near the Trade Center site is safe to breathe.

"The heroes of 9/11 are dying," she said.

The schedule for Monday's conference is as follows.

* 10 a.m. to noon: Dr. Stephen Levin, Diane Stein, Dr. Rebecca Bascom, Dr. Christine Oliver and David Worby.

* 1-3 p.m.: Documentary film "The Toxic Clouds of 9/11: A Looming Health Disaster," by Alison Johnson. (Johnson also made the documentary "Gulf War Syndrome: Aftermath of a Toxic Battlefield.")

* 3-4 p.m.: Rescue and recovery worker John Feal.

In the fall of 2005, SUNY New Paltz began offering a minor in Disaster Studies through the Institute for Disaster Mental Health. The minor focuses on training people to deal with natural, technological and manmade disasters and on how such events affect individuals, communities, organizations and the nation.

"The terrorist bombings in London, the hurricanes in Florida and the (April 2005) floods in Ulster and Orange counties remind us that disaster are not uncommon and can occur anywhere and any time," said James Halpern, director of the institute and professor of psychology at SUNY New Paltz.

©Daily Freeman 2006