

Town Hall Panel Discusses Health Issues Caused By "Toxic Brew" Of 9/11 Dust

NY1's special series of Town Hall meetings addressing the lingering issues of the September 11th attacks continued Wednesday night as a panel of experts discussed the continued health concerns of residents and responders who worked near or at the World Trade Center site in the aftermath of 9/11.

Panelists gathered at Pace University just one day after the results of the largest study on the health impact of the toxic dust were released. According to the report released Tuesday by Mount Sinai Hospital, nearly 70 percent of first responders developed new or worsened respiratory symptoms after the attacks. Among those who had no health problems before September 11th, 61 percent developed symptoms after exposure.

Attorney David Worby, who represents thousands of ailing responders, Dr. Jacqueline Moline of the WTC Medical Monitoring Team at Mount Sinai Medical Center, Dr. Kamau Kokayi from the Olive Leaf Wellness Center; and John Jay College professor Gerald Markowitz, co-author of "Are We Ready? Public Health Since 9/11" all joined the panel to explain the results of the study and the responsibilities of the government to address the results.

According to panelists, government officials misled the public about the air quality at Ground Zero, failing to protect thousands of first responders and Lower Manhattan residents who have developed serious illnesses directly linked to exposure five years after the towers fell.

The dust amounted to a "toxic brew" as Dr. Moline called it, consisting of all the components of construction, including pulverized concrete, fiberglass, gypsum, microscopic fragments of plastics, metals and glass, computers and furniture, in addition to burning jet fuel. Much of those materials also included toxic chemicals such as dioxins and benzene and toxic materials and metals, such as asbestos, lead and mercury.

"The sheer volume of the particles would overwhelm the body's ability to defend against exposure," said Dr. Moline.

One audience member expressed his horror that the Environmental Protection Agency would have given the all-clear to recovery workers after testing the air quality at the site, given the common-sense assumption that the dust contained toxic substances.

That thought was backed up by Worby, the attorney defending thousands of ailing first responders, who said the government should have shut down the site completely as a precautionary measure.

Dr. Moline agreed, citing Mayor Michael Bloomberg's skepticism about the health study.

"What's amazing to me is here's the mayor asking for caution and we wish that they had exercised that caution after 9/11 when they gave the all-clear to head down to site," said Dr. Moline.

Dr. Kokayi said he has since treated over a hundred people who were exposed to the dust at the site and said "patient after patient says, 'I was well until I was at Ground Zero.'"

All the experts also agreed that authorities neglected their duty to ensure the workers at the site wore the appropriate protective gear while performing recovery and cleanup work.

"The urgency wasn't there to get all workers to use masks to protect themselves from the fumes," said Markowitz, who added that the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) "didn't do its job."

Viewers who called in to the live town hall event shared their own stories, with one woman saying she was recently diagnosed with leukemia, despite not having been at the World Trade Center site on September 11th. She said her cancer was a result of working in the vicinity of the site for days after the towers fell.

Two Snap Polls, conducted during the town hall, indicated that the majority of NY1 viewers -- 75 percent -- believe the city's response to the health concerns following 9/11 has been inadequate.

Not surprisingly given the results of that poll, 62 percent of viewers said the federal government should set up yet another Victims Compensation Fund to aid those afflicted with ailments linked to 9/11; 27 percent said the city and the federal government should share the cost of that fund.

But when asked whether how medical professionals can link specific ailments or cancers directly to the toxic dust, Dr. Moline admitted that the causal link is not necessarily a slam dunk.

"It's tricky," she said, adding that a good indication is to "look at their health on September 10th. Many of the people were active, were fine, but then developed conditions consistent with symptoms [of toxic exposure]."

The panel only briefly touched on the lingering mental health issues of 9/11, such as Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, which Dr. Moline said "can happen months, years, and many years after an event."

Dr. Moline indicated that services such as LifeNet offer confidential mental health treatment to those New Yorkers afflicted with PTSD symptoms.

The good news, however, according to Dr. Moline, is that now that all the debris from the World Trade Center site has been removed, air quality levels have returned to pre-9/11 levels.

Meanwhile, World Trade Center site developer Larry Silverstein announced Wednesday that construction vehicles used during the rebuilding process will run on environmentally-friendly, low-sulfur fuel.

State Assembly Speaker Sheldon Silver was on hand for the announcement and said safe environmental practices are important.

"I think it's clearly a major priority for the health and safety of people who live down here," said Silver. "It's also a major priority for government."

Officials say the new green construction initiatives will reduce diesel emissions, smog and contamination.

NY1's town hall meetings continue tomorrow with a discussion on the fine line between effective policing and violating civil rights. Hosted by NY1's Budd Mishkin, scheduled panelists include former NYCLU Director Norman Siegel; Mohammad Razvi, Executive Director of the Council of Peoples Organization; Richard Aborn, president of the Citizens Crime Commission; and Richard Pildes, professor of law at NYU School of Law.

On Friday, as the four-day series of town hall meetings wraps up, NY1 anchor Roma Torre will host a discussion on the popular arts and 9/11. Scheduled panelists include Oskar Eustis, Artistic Director of The Public Theatre; John Hoffman, Vice President of Documentaries at HBO; Catharine Stimpson, NYU Dean of the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences; and David Friend, Vanity Fair's editor of creative development and author of "Watching The World Change: The Stories Behind The Images Of 9/11."

Members of the public can reserve seats to attend each of the town meetings by logging on to www.pace.edu or by calling (212) 379-3447.