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GROUND ZERO RESPONDERS THE FALLOUT

City puts 9/11 tab at \$393M yearly Mayor says 'act of war' on NYC means U.S. should kick in for costs of 9/11 injuries

BY EMI ENDO

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It could cost \$393 million a year to treat the thousands of 9/11 emergency responders and others who were exposed at Ground Zero, according to a city report released yesterday.

Mayor Michael Bloomberg said the federal government should pick up at least \$150 million of the annual tab for the 43,000 people who say they got sick after breathing contaminated air at the World Trade Center site.

"I believe our city's first responders were responding to an act of war against this nation," Bloomberg said at a City Hall news conference, adding, "We're going to do our part, and we want the feds to do theirs as well. "

Bloomberg announced the findings of a panel he convened to look at 9/11-related health impacts. In its report, the panel called for expanding treatment services at Bellevue Hospital Center, sustaining mental health services, and reopening the Victim Compensation Fund. It also recommended hiring a citywide health coordinator and launching a comprehensive Web site to overcome confusion and a lack of awareness about available services.

The report acknowledged it was nearly impossible to project how many people will ultimately fall ill from something they associate with Ground Zero and how much treatment will cost. The list of health problems Sept. 11 workers and others have reported include breathing disorders such as chronic sinusitis, asthma and severe lung scarring. Psychological problems such as post-traumatic stress disorder and depression also persist.

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Some advocates who have been pushing for 9/11-related health funding welcomed the mayor's involvement. "The city is making an attempt to put a number on this, and once you start doing that, that makes the pressure more specific," said Suzanne Mattei, of the Sierra Club, who has organized protests at the World Trade Center site calling for federal health funding. If Bloomberg follows through, she said, "he's an ally we could use. "

Several members of New York's congressional delegation yesterday applauded the report. Rep. Carolyn Maloney (D-Manhattan), who has introduced legislation to reopen the Victim Compensation Fund, said she appreciated Bloomberg's support. "We must provide compensation for lost wages and injuries in order to make the heroes of 9/11 whole," she said in a statement.

If the compensation fund, which was closed in December 2003, is reopened, the city panel said liability for the city and its contractors for claims involving the cleanup work at the site should be eliminated.

David Worby, an attorney who represents plaintiffs suing the city, said the main goal was that they be compensated somehow. "The people in the lawsuit who fought valiantly to bring this wrongdoing to national attention will get their day of compensation," he said, instead of their day in court.

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