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9/11 First Responders Stricken With Cancer Face Enormous Medical Bills

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Last night, we introduced you to two 9/11 first responders in the fight for their lives – against cancer. It's a battle made more difficult by the fact that neither medical nor political officials will confirm that the time spent at ground zero may be to blame.

As Elizabeth Kaledin reports in part two of the two-part series, cancer patients are now suing, hoping for a little help.

It was a glimmer of comforting news amid the rubble – something everyone wanted to believe. On September 13th, 2001, just moments after removing a large, high-tech respirator that she used out of the public eye, former EPA administrator Christine Todd Whitman announced that the air at ground zero was safe to breathe.

"If there's any good news out of all this it's that everything we've tested for, which includes asbestos, lead and VOCs have been below any level of concern for the general public health," Whitman said at the time.

Six years later there's proof that was dead wrong.

Thousands of cases of lung disease have been linked to the aftermath of the terrorist attacks and now cancer. Blood cancers like leukemia and myeloma are cropping up in first responders like Gary Acker.

"I just didn't want to believe this is where it came from," says Acker.

Acker spent 33 days at ground zero, working for AT&T, without a mask or protective gear.

"If I knew it was bad for me, I would have requested the right equipment, but I wasn't going to leave," says Acker. "I would go there tomorrow if they needed my help, but that's just me."

Today his main job is staying alive and trying to pay the bills.

He gets treated at a cancer center in New Jersey. His doctor James Salwitz says Acker's medical expenses are crushing.

"Certainly in the million dollar range and it continues every day with him," says Salwitz.

"I ate through all of my savings, let me put it that way," says Acker.

Acker and other cancer sufferers who were at ground zero, like retired New York City Detective John Walcott, are now suing the city, hoping for help.

"I can put my head on my pillow. I don't know if Mayor Bloomberg could," says Walcott. "I don't know where Mayor Giuliani – who was allegedly told that the air was great, and he said that the air was great and now we all know that was a lie – why he hasn't stepped up."

Because cancer is not yet officially recognized as a 9/11-related illness, funds are not readily available to pay for medical care.

Attorney David Worby, who's heading up the lawsuit, charges government officials lied about air quality at the site. He says now they should care for the people they led into harm's way.

"I don't need them to admit it; everyone knows it. I need them to compensate the victims," says Worby. "They're

revictimizing these people.”

Off the record, many doctors will admit they're concerned that 9/11-related cancers will start cropping up in large numbers, first the blood cancers like Acker's, then ten to 15 years out, solid tumor cancers. But the science of making a direct link is painstakingly slow.

Reporter: To admit that what happened at ground zero has caused cancer opens a huge can of worms and an expensive can of worms.

Salwitz: It does. That's hard to argue with. But on the other hand not doing so opens a more expensive can of worm, because if these things are happening, we're going to have to pay for it anyway.

In the meantime, Dr. Salwitz wonders why people like Acker and Walcott can't be given the benefit of the doubt. They gave so much to their country six years ago and their country should give something back.

“I don't think the Gary Ackers of this world have any personal responsibility here,” says Salwitz. “I think they walked into hell and we asked them to go there.”

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