

**New York Daily News - <http://www.nydailynews.com>****First-class help**

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It took more than five years, but Mayor Bloomberg has finally vowed to get first-class health care for the tens of thousands of heroes who responded in the days and months after the World Trade Center collapse.

It was a sweet, if overdue, victory for those sickened after the 9/11 attacks, many of whom fought to get the city to admit that their long, debilitating efforts to recover human remains and clear Ground Zero led to chronic and sometimes fatal diseases.

"For some who were exposed to the dust cloud and fumes after the towers collapsed, including those who took part in the rescue and recovery operations, new pain and new suffering has continued to emerge," Bloomberg said yesterday.

"Some of them have gotten sick. They deserve first-class care without exception."

The mayor called on Congress yesterday to reopen the 9/11 Victim Compensation Fund to end the legal haggling that has delayed thousands of workers injured on The Pile and their families from receiving money to pay for their treatment and lost wages.

In an 83-page report, the city concluded that 681,000 people - including downtown office workers, students and residents - need medical monitoring and care that could exceed \$393 million a year.

Some 60% of the estimated 50,000 responders are sick and at least 100 have died, according to findings by Mount Sinai Medical Center and state health officials.

But 70% lack adequate insurance to pay for their care, more than 8,000 have sued the city and its contractors for their injuries, and others are caught in years-long fights with the city for workers' compensation and pension benefits.

"I cried when I heard the news," said disabled Securities and Exchange Commission attorney Robert Gulack, 53, who suffered permanent lung damage after returning to work near Ground Zero a month after the disaster. "We've seen so many people drop dead. We worked for years to break this stonewall of silence and admit we have huge health problems from this crisis. Thank goodness that's over with."

"The city is out of the denial stage and into the acceptance stage," added Detectives' Endowment Association President Michael Palladino.

Federal money is needed to expand three monitoring and treatment programs for those sickened by Ground Zero contaminants, particularly neighborhood residents and businesspeople who haven't gotten care yet, Bloomberg said. But the Bush administration has been slow to fund such efforts, and it is unclear whether the city will get the money from Washington.

"The mayor's plan is the right and ethical approach to this health emergency," said Rep. Carolyn Maloney (D-Manhattan, Queens), who pledged yesterday with fellow New York House members and Sens. Chuck Schumer and Hillary Clinton to get the necessary funds.

A White House spokesman said it was reviewing the recommendations and that 9/11 health coordinator John Howard's report on health needs - expected at the end of this month - would "be instrumental in guiding our course."

Bloomberg said he planned to ask Congress to liquidate the \$1 billion captive insurance fund established to pay for liability claims and transfer the money to a reopened Victim Compensation Fund - a strategy he said would release the city from admitting fault in illnesses that arose after the attacks. A special master would

decide who's eligible and distribute benefits.

"We'd rather stand with you in front of Congress than against you in a courtroom," Deputy Mayor Ed Skyler said to the city's 8,000 adversaries.

Ken Feinberg, who served as the original fund's special master, was mentioned as a possible candidate for the job. In a statement, he said he'd "be honored" to take on the role again, and agreed the fund should be reopened.

The recommendations fall short of calling for funds to treat the cancers and certain lung diseases some workers have blamed on their time at Ground Zero, and they may not resolve some disputes over workers' compensation and other benefits. But even critics accepted the plan's limitations.

"Mayor Bloomberg hit a single today and I'm sure he'll come back and hit a home run and will include the people with the benzene-induced leukemias, the blood cell cancers and interstitial lung diseases," said attorney David Worby, who's representing the 8,000 responders suing the city. "It's a fantastic start."