

New York Daily News - <http://www.nydailynews.com>**The abandoned heroes**

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Monday, September 4th, 2006

It has become an unspoken shame of Ground Zero.

Thousands of undocumented immigrants who toiled amid toxic dust to clean buildings around the World Trade Center after the 9/11 attacks are suffering from serious health problems - but have few places to turn for treatment, concerned doctors and advocates said.

The only free medical care for these workers - a modest, privately funded program at Bellevue Hospital - may lose its financial benefactor a year from now unless the government steps in.

The workers who played a pivotal role in reopening the nation's financial hub within days of the attacks said they feel abandoned, especially as anti-immigrant sentiments are stoked in Washington.

"When we were needed on 9/11, no one asked for our papers. Now they don't want us here anymore," said Lucelly Gil, 50, who worked in the disaster zone for months, wearing only a flimsy dust mask and plastic gloves for protection.

A Daily News investigation documented the exploitation of the undocumented workers just a few months after the attacks. The January 2002 exclusive revealed that contractors had been plucking illegal immigrants off streetcorners and putting them to work without giving them safety training or protective equipment.

"All of us who worked in the disaster zone worked because we wanted to help the city," said Alberto Melo, 47, one of the day laborers.

Melo and Gil are suffering from ailments ranging from severe respiratory problems to depression - symptoms also plaguing hundreds of firefighters, cops and other first responders who worked in or near the smoldering pit.

Spurred by a recent series of editorials by The News, Gov. Pataki signed three laws last month aimed at covering the health costs of 9/11 responders. But the benefits won't be extended to undocumented workers.

"The only thing that mattered to the contractors was that we work quickly," Melo said, noting his boss would drop in for brief visits to the work sites wearing a heavy-duty protective mask equipped with canister filters.

Meanwhile, Melo and his fellow workers would eat their pack lunches perched on dusty piles of debris.

"We're getting sicker each day," Melo said in Spanish.

Exactly how many workers are suffering in silence is unclear, said Karah Newton of the group Beyond Ground Zero, a coalition of community and legal advocates who are trying to expand medical care for these workers and low-income residents of lower Manhattan.

But the demand for treatment among the overlooked groups suggests that the roughly 500 people currently being treated at Bellevue are "just the tip of the iceberg," Newton said.

Dr. Joan Reibman, who leads the Bellevue Hospital WTC Health Impact Treatment Program, feels strongly that government has an obligation to care for these workers.

"We got the downtown area - the stock market, the economic heart of the United States - functioning in two weeks of the disaster," said Reibman, who is a pulmonary specialist at the NYU School of Medicine. "The reason was because every office covered with 3 inches of dust in all the surrounding buildings was cleaned up by undocumented workers. We owe them a lot."

It will be an uphill battle trying to get government dollars for the program, currently funded by a two-year, \$1.8million grant from the American Red Cross.

New York City officials have so far been reluctant to acknowledge that health problems even among police and firefighters who worked in The Pit could be linked to the toxic substances they were exposed to.

David Worby, who is waging a lawsuit on behalf of 8,000 WTC responders and their survivors, said \$20 million has been spent on city lawyers to deny claims of cops, firefighters and others who were sickened.

"The government must understand that there were other heroes, too," Melo said. "We risked our lives and health working without protection."