

TOPLINES:

We must pass the Never Forget The Heroes Act to fully fund the VCF program through 2020 and make it permanent.

9/11 first responders and survivors were there for us, we need to be there for them. That's what we meant by "Never Forget."

Chairmen Nadler and Cohen, Ranking Members Collins and Johnson, I want to thank you for inviting me to testify today on H.R. 1327, the Never Forget the Heroes: Permanent Authorization of the September 11th Victim Compensation Fund Act, which I introduced with Chairman Nadler, Congressman King, and 90 of our colleagues. Today, we are proud to have a strongly bipartisan bill, with 306 cosponsors, 79 of them Republicans. I am grateful that the Committee

recognizes the importance of supporting 9/11 first responders, survivors, and their families and the urgency of passing this bill as soon as possible.

On September 11, 2001, our nation was horrifically attacked. Nearly 3,000 – exactly 2,997 innocent people were brutally murdered and thousands more were injured in New York City, Shanksville, Pennsylvania, and at the Pentagon simply for being American or being on American soil.

And yet, it still gets worse.

The death toll from that terrible day continues to grow. In the years since 9/11, tens of thousands more men and women, including first responders, relief workers, and local residents, have lost their lives or gotten sick as a result of their exposure to toxic chemicals, pulverized drywall, and powdered cement at the crash sites even though we, the US Government, told them it was safe to be at the sites, to go back to work, to go to school.

Soon, deaths from 9/11 diseases may outnumber those lost on that fateful day.

9/11 was an attack on America and in response, our nation committed to finding those responsible, and holding them accountable.

The first veterans of the War on Terror were the first responders, the volunteers and the survivors of 9/11.

Today they live all over the country -- in 433 out of 435 congressional districts.

There are firefighters, police officers, construction workers, electrical workers, and volunteers from every state who answered the call and traveled to DC, Pennsylvania and NY to help with the recovery.

There are those who lived, worked, and went to school near Ground Zero who are now trying to build lives all across the country.

We have a moral obligation to provide support and compensation to these heroes and their families. Not only did they come to our aid when we needed

them, but many are sick because they trusted the federal government when it said the air around Ground Zero was safe to breathe.

In October 2011, after a 9-year fight, the James Zadroga 9/11 Health and Compensation Act of 2010 was signed into law, establishing the World Trade Center Health Program and reopening and revising the September 11th Victim Compensation Fund. These programs provide health monitoring and financial compensation to first responders, survivors, and their families.

In 2015, I am proud to say that Congress permanently reauthorized the health program, but the Victim Compensation Fund will expire next year if don't act because it was only given a 5-year extension.

Making matters worse, the Special Master of the Fund announced in February that the fund would not make it to 2020 because of a funding shortfall, partly due to an increase in cancer claims. In order to extend its life, the VCF was forced to cut all pending awards by 50 to 70 percent.

This is devastating for first responders, survivors, and their families who depend on this compensation.

For the last three and a half months, they have not been getting the help they deserve, the help our nation owes them.

Since February 25, 2019, more than 830 compensation recipients have received reduced awards from the Victim Compensation Fund because of a funding shortfall.

This is unacceptable, and we must act now to correct this.

They shouldn't have to worry about the program running out of funding or need to come back to Congress every five years to beg for program reauthorization. That kind of uncertainty is unfair and unsustainable.

Our legislation would make these families whole by requiring the Special Master to revisit these reduced claims and pay out the difference. And it would permanently reauthorize the fund. The respiratory problems, cancers

and other illnesses they face are permanent, and this program should be as well.

As evidence by the more than 300 cosponsors of the Never Forget the Heroes Act, this isn't a Democratic or Republican issue or a New York and New Jersey issue – there are Americans of all political persuasions in every corner of our country who are counting on us. Our whole country owes them a debt, a debt that we can never fully repay.

Allowing this fund to expire, or run out of the funding it needs, sets a dangerous precedent. If, god forbid, our nation ever suffers an attack like this again, first responders must know that the nation will support them and their families.

Look at who is sitting here with us today – these heroes are the reason we fight and I want to conclude by recognizing all the first responders, survivors, and family members of victims who have spent countless hours advocating for this bill and the VCF.

You'll hear from a few of them during this hearing. We would never have been able to garner the support of our colleagues without their tireless dedication and hard work.

They continue to be my inspiration every single day since the fight for their healthcare and financial security began.

As much as I love my time with them, we would all rather they never have to come to DC or Congress again.

After 9/11, we vowed to never forget. With that promise, we committed to making sure these heroes never have to go without the support they need. I will tell this Committee what I've told many people before-I will not rest, the other people testifying before you today will not rest, until we have fully honored this commitment.

This is the very least we can do, as a grateful nation.