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9/11 Survivor

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Judiciary Committee
“The Need to Reauthorize the September 11th Victim Compensation
Fund.”

Thank you to Chairman Nadler, Ranking Member Collins, and the rest of the committee for holding a hearing on this incredibly important issue.

My name is Lila Nordstrom. On September 11th, 2001 I was 17 years-old and a student at Stuyvesant High School, a New York City public school with 3,000 students just three blocks from the World Trade Center.

The morning of 9/11 I was in a class on the tenth floor with windows facing the Twin Towers. My classmates and I saw two planes hit the World Trade Center and watched in horror as dozens of people jumped to their deaths and thousands of people evacuated. We were still in class when the first building collapsed. As a dust cloud rushed towards our windows, we were ordered to go to our homerooms, then, eventually, to evacuate the building.

I was one of the first people to evacuate Stuyvesant. The instant that I stepped outside, the second WTC tower collapsed and everybody began to run. I eventually ran out of breath and a gym teacher named Ms. Luczak, herself only two years out of college, found me and began to walk with me. People had parked along the Hudson River to play radio news for evacuees, so as we walked we heard reports that many unidentified planes were still in the air and that the entire island of Manhattan could be evacuated. We were far from any bridges and thought we might end up having to swim. I told her that I didn't know how, so she told me she could swim me across the Hudson River if we got trapped. We slowly found other students as we walked and eventually one of my friends joined the group. I was too afraid to go home, having heard on the radio that a plane was headed for the Empire State Building, only a few blocks from where I lived, so I walked across the 59th Street Bridge with her instead. We eventually made it on foot to Astoria, Queens, ten miles in total, and I spent the night at her house.

When classes resumed, Stuyvesant students were told to report to a high school in Brooklyn. At the time our school building was being used as a command center and morgue for the WTC cleanup effort because of its proximity to Ground Zero. Less than a week after the attacks, however, Christine Todd Whitman, the head of the Environmental Protection Agency, assured New Yorkers that the air downtown was "safe to breath." Based on this reassurance, government officials made the decision to send Stuyvesant students back to lower Manhattan on October 9th, less than a month after the attacks.

On the day that Stuyvesant students returned to lower Manhattan, Ground Zero was still burning and would continue to burn for another three months. It was the early days of the cleanup so the neighborhood wasn't yet open to the public, and every morning, students had to pass through multiple police checkpoints just to get into the school. Once there, we were given cryptic warnings not to drink out of the water fountains or leave during the day for any reason.

The acrid smell of a smoke permeated the building every day by noon, and the school was constantly re-contaminated by a continuous line of trucks carrying hazardous debris from the WTC site to the barge docked next to the building. From the third floor students could watch as clouds of dust spiraled into the air while truck after truck dumped loads of toxic pulverized debris right next to our air intake system. This happened all day, every day. The trucks were uncovered and as they drove by they also left a trail of dust behind them that settled on every surface outside. Testing of the air around the school showed that on many days there were the same levels of toxic dust in the air around Stuyvesant as there were at Ground Zero itself. Government agencies were repeatedly asked to at least hose down the truckloads of debris, but by the time they started doing so winter had set in and they had to stop because the debris was freezing.

It was only after our return that we learned how haphazard and incomplete the cleaning of our building had been as it transitioned from morgue back to school. No HazMat team was called in to clean Stuyvesant. The highly publicized one million dollars reportedly spent to clean the building was not used to replace the contaminated filters in our ventilation system, which remained until the end of January, after months of stalling by the Board of Education. The money was also not used to clean the building's air vents, which were still packed with WTC dust when I graduated that spring. The money was certainly not used to replace the contaminated carpeting and fabric in our auditorium, either. That room, where we held our first meeting upon returning and the school's most popular event that spring, was not fully reupholstered until 2014, more than ten years later.

Suffice it to say my lungs suffered, and I certainly was not alone. As soon as Stuyvesant students returned there were widespread reports of nosebleeds, coughs that just wouldn't go away, chronic headaches, and students suffering from a slew of worsening respiratory issues.

That was layered on top of the trauma of the attacks themselves, and the continuing trauma of living with the cleanup. One day we arrived to find the mangled remainder of the sphere statue that sat between the Twin Towers parked in front of our school, a horrifying reminder for us to ponder as we started the day. We also had fire drills in our first days back that showed us our new emergency route, which was, for some reason, to run towards Ground Zero. The area was still closed off to the public and was populated by National Guardsmen in heavy duty dust masks. It turned out that our usual evacuation route was being blocked by the debris barge. We were sandwiched between the fire and the dust.

Unfortunately, Stuyvesant was not the only school in Lower Manhattan to send children downtown before it was safe. There were some 19,000 public school students in the contamination zone between the fall of 2001 and spring of 2002, including thousands of elementary-aged kids. There were, in fact, two public elementary schools just across the street from Stuyvesant, both within two blocks of the barge operation. There were also students attending private schools in the area,

as well as thousands of children living downtown who either weren't old enough for school or went to school outside the zone.

Thousands of teachers and school staff were also exposed when these schools reopened, as were tens of thousands of college students and professors at Borough of Manhattan Community College and PACE University, and hundreds of NYU students living in downtown housing.

Beyond the schools, lower Manhattan is also one of the busiest and most densely populated neighborhoods in the US, and roughly 25,000 residents and 325,000 office workers also returned to the area before it was safe. Many were left to clean up contaminated homes and offices themselves, given only dangerously inadequate guidance, which they followed unaware of the great risk to their health. Many of these spaces were continually re-contaminated by the cleanup process anyway. At the same time, government dollars were spent to entice unsuspecting new residents, including young families, to the area. The Lower Manhattan Development Corporation, facing vacancy rates as high as 50% in some areas, used this public money to fund major rent subsidies for new residents. Meanwhile, survivors spent long months in the center of a toxic stew as government officials told them any symptoms they experienced were in their heads or would disappear as soon as the fires went out.

What the EPA knew, but we didn't, was that the air was not safe. Now, in addition to the illnesses and deaths we're seeing among responders, the death toll from 9/11-related illnesses is also mounting among survivors and new people continue to fall ill, many of them my age or younger.

Like many survivors I now suffer from 9/11-related health conditions. Many of these conditions are chronic. My entire 20s was dominated by financial panic because even asthma and GERD can be quite expensive to treat under our current health care system. Adding to that stress is the fact that doctors in California, where I live, have often never seen a 9/11 survivor and don't understand the unique health risks I face. The World Trade Center Health Program has meaningfully changed my life. More specifically the Nationwide Provider Network has been a huge advantage for the thousands of lower Manhattan students who went away to college or started their adult lives elsewhere. I used to stockpile asthma medicine and "wait it out" when I should have gone to the doctor. Thanks to the WTC Health Program, I don't have to do those things anymore.

Unfortunately my future, and that of my classmates, is looking a little more scary than chronic-but-hopefully-manageable health conditions. Back in January 2006, when James Zadroga became the first responder to have his death directly linked to his exposures on 9/11, an autopsy revealed ground glass, asbestos, chromium, lead and benzene in his lung tissue. Responders were not the only people exposed to these known carcinogens. So were we.

NIOSH has now linked more than 68 cancers to the WTC toxins. Not surprisingly, many former students from the schools south of Canal Street, as well as members of the community and people who worked in the area, are now being diagnosed with the same cancers as the first responders.

I already can say that I went to school with more cancer survivors than anybody I know, and I haven't even had my 20th high school reunion yet. Just in my limited personal network from Stuyvesant I know at least five people who have been diagnosed with lymphomas, my friend Michele is in remission from thyroid cancer, and another classmate from my year is in remission from testicular cancer. Other Stuyvesant alumni from those years have been diagnosed with rare bone cancers, melanoma, and there's even a male breast cancer survivor among us.

Now our classmates, people still in their 20s and early 30s, are starting to die. Just a couple of months ago a classmate of mine, Cathy Choy, passed away at age 33 from 9/11-linked gastric cancer. Her Victim Compensation Fund award has not yet been paid. When her husband finally receives it, it will be reduced by either 50% or 70%.

Stuyvesant students are not the only ones getting sick. Rozaliya Yarusska was a 22-year-old Pace University student on 9/11 and has been diagnosed with nasal cancer and eye cancer. Magdali Vergara-Martinez was a 17-year-old BMCC student. She's been diagnosed with thyroid cancer. Her VCF award will be cut 50%. The growing number of cancer cases has had an affect on all of us, even those that aren't sick. With each new cancer report I also hear from classmates consumed by fears about what's around the bend and wondering what we can do to protect ourselves.

The fact that people our age are only starting to get sick and die now is not surprising. We were younger when exposed, so the latency periods for our illnesses have been longer. For us, and for our families, our concern is compounded by the fact that the Victim Compensation Fund is closing. While those who are sick now will receive drastically reduced awards, many of my friends won't find out they're sick in time to make any claim at all.

Women have even more reason to be concerned. Much of the early research on 9/11's health impacts was done on the disproportionately male responder population. Many women's health conditions won't make it onto the list of covered conditions in time to be compensable through the VCF. Breast cancer has just now surpassed prostate cancer as the most commonly diagnosed cancer among survivors, but there still isn't much data on women's reproductive health or conditions such as autoimmune disorders that disproportionately affect women. We've seen the surge in breast cancers in the news, of course, but only because an unusual number of these cases are in men. One of these men, as I mentioned before, is a classmate of mine.

Young adults are also especially at risk of losing out on the VCF because we face some big obstacles to even finding out about the 9/11 health services. Like me, many of us no longer live in New York City and don't have access to local information about the VCF, don't see it reported on in local media, and don't have local advocates. This often seems to get lost in the conversation about who needs this program and why. Stuyvesant alumni alone live in locales from rural Tennessee, to coastal Oregon, to Texas and beyond. Thousands of other New York City kids have begun their adult lives in other parts of the country as well.

Unfortunately, cancer does not respect arbitrary funding deadlines. Right now there are thousands of 17 and 18 year-olds, just beginning their adult lives, who will have to live with the results of their WTC exposures for another 70 or 80 years. The older exposed kids, people my age, are learning of our increasingly terrifying health prospects just as many of us are starting families or are planning to in the next few years. When we get sick, when we have to take leave from work to recover or god forbid pass away from a serious illness with a young child at home, who is going to help our families fill in the financial gap? A responder or a survivor who gets sick in 2027 deserves the same help that they would've have received if they got sick in 2017.

Those of us exposed to the toxic dust at Ground Zero as kids had our health put at risk before we were old enough to understand the risks or give informed consent. Upon our return to Stuyvesant we were even paraded in front of news cameras to show how "safe" it was downtown. Essentially, were conscripted into a massive PR effort that encouraged the rest of the community to return to a dangerous place even as the federal government knew the air might make all of us sick. If the VCF is allowed to reduce payouts and expire, a resource meant to ease our suffering will become yet another symbol of how we were sacrificed by a government that thought a quick return to normalcy after a tragic event was more important than the health and safety of the children who lived through it, the responders who cleaned up the mess, and the thousands of area workers and residents who were lied to and compelled to put their health on the line without their knowledge or consent.

As health concerns begin to overwhelm us, we hope the federal government will have our backs. In 2011, and again in 2015, the Government did the right thing by enacting, and then re-authorizing, the Zadroga Health and Compensation Act. Congress must do the right thing one more time and fully fund and extend the VCF.