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**Hearing on
“The Need to Reauthorize the September 11th Victim Compensation Fund”**

Statement of Michael V. O’Connell
of Westbury, New York
Before the United States House of Representatives
Committee on the Judiciary
Subcommittee on the Constitution, Civil Rights, and Civil Liberties
Hearing regarding H.R. 1327
The Need to Reauthorize the September 11th Victim Compensation Fund
June 11, 2019, 10:00 a.m.
Rayburn House Office Building, Room 2141

My name is Michael O’Connell and I am a retired Lieutenant from the Fire Department of the City of New York. I want to personally thank Chairman Nadler, Ranking Member Collins, and the Committee Members for allowing me to be here today at this hearing to tell my story, which is really no different from the thousands of others who suffer from their heroic actions.

Today, I can say thank you to those countless selfless heroes, volunteers, survivors, and those affected at the three terrorist sites because I get the best health care treatment and I have been compensated by the September 11th Victim Compensation Fund.

I was just a twenty-five year old probationary firefighter on that beautiful Tuesday morning of the 11th, without a clue as to what was happening. I had just transferred from the New York City Police Department in May of 2001, and was not even graduated from the FDNY Fire Academy on that horrific day.

When the towers were struck, I was home on Long Island and immediately raced into the Ladder 129 Fire House in Flushing, Queens where I was doing my field training. Within minutes of my arrival, we started to respond to Lower Manhattan.

During our response we were notified of the collapse of the south tower of the World Trade Center and a fellow firefighter turned to me and said, “do you realize how many guys we just lost?” The truth was that I didn’t have a clue, but I would learn quickly.

Upon arrival, we went to work right in the war zone later known as “Ground Zero”. We were given many tasks and tried our best to search for human life, but unfortunately, we were not very successful. Countless hours we spent digging by hand.

To this day, there is only one true memory etched into my brain, and one that still haunts me when I put my head on the pillow at night. As firefighters, we wear Scott packs that are equipped with pass alarms. A pass alarm is meant to go off and make a loud screeching sound in the likelihood that a firefighter is stuck and is motionless. For the first few minutes of our arrival, and the countless hours that passed, that is all we heard. Our brothers were trapped beneath that pile of concrete and steel and we could not get to them. It is a difficult memory, but one that keeps me going. It reminds me that those men and women who gave their lives that day were selfless, and I try my best to live my life to that standard.

In the midst of the chaos and loss of life, I can tell you that there is another thought that I had. I would not want to be anywhere else in the world at that moment. We were there to help, and I was part of something that showed the world that we would not back down to anyone. We helped bring closure to families that just wanted something tangible, some part that remained, to bury. Now it is your turn, you were not there on the Pile, but what you do in this moment is just as important as what we all did at Ground Zero.

I had worked the pile for the days and weeks that followed, with very little protection in that dust cloud, and I would later pay the ultimate price. That change came on January first of 2007, when I woke up, and instantly knew something was wrong. I couldn't get out of bed, and it had felt like someone came in my room that night, and beat me up with a baseball bat. My legs, ankles and feet were so swollen, it made it very difficult to walk to the car to get to the doctor. I was put through a series of tests that day, and from what the doctors had seen, the prognosis did not look good.

My wife Rebecca, who was six months pregnant with our first child, was escorted to a conference room where the team of doctors gave us the news: that this looked like an advanced case of lymphoma, and that I most likely did not have much time left. At this point, all I wanted to do was make it long enough to see the birth of my first child.

It is obvious that, since I am testifying here today, and by the grace of God, we know what happened. I am a proud father of three beautiful children named Aidan, Colton, and Alexandra, who have witnessed their father battle 9/11 illnesses since they were born.

I was very fortunate that the original prognosis was wrong. I was actually diagnosed with a very rare autoimmune disease called sarcoidosis. I was one of the youngest and first firefighters diagnosed with sarcoidosis. Hundreds more have been diagnosed since.

I spent the next few months in recovery, and with the proper treatments, I was able to get back on my feet. Sadly, I cannot say that about others.

My career in the FDNY that I was so passionate about was cut short, and 9/11 ensured I would be unable to continue as a full duty firefighter. I was on pace to advance throughout the FDNY as a senior officer, but I was unable to finish that dream of protecting the greatest city in the world.

I ask you all, respectfully, how is it fair that I was duly compensated, but others that are now sick and dying from their exposure will not be? It seems unfair that I was unlucky to get sick, but lucky in that I got sick early, so that I could avoid a potential cut, or worse, having no VCF after December 2020?

How is my family financially safe for a lifetime, but the families of those not yet diagnosed are left hanging? These people are sick eighteen years later, and are not going to receive the same benefits as those who got sick before them, because they are unlucky to get sick at a time when the VCF is running out of funds.

I speak today in tribute to the 343 firefighters, the 23 NYPD, and the 37 PAPD that didn't make it out on September 11, 2001, and to the thousands who are still sick, and who are dying, and especially for my brother firefighter Ray Pfeiffer of the FDNY and who is no longer with us.

I promised myself to keep fighting for my family, and for those who are sick or who have passed and have yet to be compensated. Because one day, I might not be here to tell my story, but there will be someone else to follow and continue that tradition, a tradition that is rich in history, and a tradition where we leave no one behind.

In closing, I have made countless trips to the hill with the men and women behind me. We are simply imploring this committee to extend and re-fund the VCF, so that thousands of people across our great nation get the help that they deserve and they have earned.

Thank you for your time today, Chairman, Ranking Member, and the Committee. God bless you and God bless those behind me, and God bless America.