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Latinos in 9/11 Cleanup Crews Are Sick and Tired

These workers who labored to remove toxic debris from buildings near the World Trade Center are still fighting for legal immigration status.

September 24, 2021 By Jeanette L. Pinnace

Many Latino workers who cleared away rubble from the aftermath of the terrorist attack on New York City's Twin Towers on September 11, 2001, are still grappling with the effects of the cleanup on their health, according to a recent article by The Associated Press (AP) published on NBCNews.com. But adding insult to injury, many of them are undocumented immigrants who have yet to obtain the legal residential status they long ago requested as compensation for their service and health troubles.

Franklin Anchahua-Herrera, age 50, from Peru, was one of those workers. Like many other workers in the country illegally who were involved in the massive effort to clear the wreckage in Lower Manhattan, Anchahua-Herrera did not seek medical assistance when he became ill for fear of deportation.

Many of these immigrants, who were informally hired by private cleaning companies, suffer from health problems, including respiratory illnesses, gastrointestinal tract disturbances, posttraumatic stress disorder, cancer and a host of psychological problems.

Findings from previous studies revealed a connection between exposure to the dust from the destruction of the towers and various cleanup workers' health complaints.

The Latino workers want a bill first introduced in 2017 by former Representative Joseph Crowley to expedite legal status for immigrant 9/11 responders and cleanup personnel to be resurrected. The legislation was tabled after Crowley retired and was succeeded by Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez. (Her office said the bill is being considered for reintroduction, according to the AP.)

Next month, some of the immigrants will be protesting to call attention to their efforts to force the government to respond to their request for legal status.

Lucelly Gil, 65, a cleanup worker from Colombia who developed breast cancer and is in treatment for depression, received compensation from the World Trade Center Health Program. The initiative was created to provide health care to everyone—without regard to immigration status—affected

by toxic dust caused by the disaster.

“Instead of giving us some compensation, they could have given us (immigration) papers,” said Gil. “All of us, all of the Hispanic workers, we saw the consequences of that cleanup work later on.”

To learn more about the aftereffects of exposure to toxic dust resulting from the World Trade Center destruction, read “Opinion: Lessons on Toxic Dust from 9/11 Are Too Often Unheeded.”

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