

Bill Would Expand Care and Compensation for Ground Zero Workers

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By ANTHONY DePALMA

WASHINGTON, Sept. 18 — The Bloomberg administration is supporting a new Congressional bill that would provide health treatment and financial compensation for all workers, residents and others exposed to the dust and smoke from the collapsed World Trade Center.

The bill, called the James Zadroga 9/11 Health and Compensation Act, was introduced by several members of New York's Congressional delegation Monday night. It would establish a long-term program to provide a broad range of physical and mental health services similar to those now being offered at Mount Sinai Medical Center and several other medical institutions in the metropolitan area to ground zero workers.

The bill would also reopen the September 11th Victim Compensation Fund to help those injured by exposure to the dust recover financial losses related to their illnesses.

The bill does not include cost estimates for medical screening, treatment or compensation.

Edward Skyler, the New York City deputy mayor for administration, who testified on Tuesday before the health subcommittee of the House Committee on Energy and Commerce, said that Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg supported reopening the fund because it would “enable the city to get out of the courtroom and focus its energies on helping those who continue to struggle with the aftermath of 9/11.”

In Albany, Gov. Eliot Spitzer added his strong support on Tuesday to passage of the bill.

The city is facing more than 8,000 lawsuits by workers who labored in the cleanup and recovery operation at ground zero in 2001 and 2002 and who say they became sick because the city was negligent about their safety.

“New York City would rather stand with those who’ve filed suit, rather than against them in a courtroom,” Mr. Skyler said.

Tuesday’s hearing was the fourth in a week to deal with health issues related to ground zero. Since Democrats gained a majority in Congress, those issues have received far more attention than in previous years, and the New York delegation is hoping that Democratic control of Congress will make it easier to get the legislation approved.

The Zadroga bill is named for a New York City detective who died in 2006 after spending hundreds of hours at ground zero. His death was the first to be officially linked to exposure to the dust.

The legislation was sponsored by Carolyn B. Maloney and Jerrold L. Nadler of Manhattan, both Democrats, and Vito J. Fossella of Staten Island, a Republican.

Despite the bipartisan support for the legislation, it could face significant obstacles. Representative Frank Pallone Jr., a New Jersey Democrat who is chairman of the health subcommittee, which has jurisdiction over the health care part of the legislation, said he expected to see objections to the bill from Republicans opposed to big government programs as well as from those worried about the cost of such programs.

Dr. John Howard, the federal government’s 9/11 health coordinator, testified at Tuesday’s hearing that a federal task force studying options for a comprehensive health plan for ground zero workers completed its work last April and had not met since then.

He said the government needed to see actual costs for thousands of ground zero workers who had received examinations and prescription drugs in New York and other places before making a final decision on the shape, and possible costs, of a long-range plan.