

Obama Backs 9/11 Health Bill; Palin Says Help is Needed

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By: Josh Rogers

Sen. Barack Obama's campaign told Downtown Express Thursday that the Democratic presidential candidate supports an \$11 billion bill to help workers and residents suffering from health ailments believed to have been caused by the environmental fallout from the destruction of the Twin Towers.

"Yes, Obama does support the bill," Blake Zeff, New York communications director for the campaign, wrote in an email to the paper.

The bill would reopen the 9/11 victims compensation fund to provide health monitoring and treatment for people who can demonstrate health problems from the toxic chemicals and dust that covered Lower Manhattan after 9/11.

There have been several deaths attributed to 9/11, and doctors from Mount Sinai, St. Vincent's hospitals and other medical centers say they have treated many people who worked at ground zero or lived or worked in the area who are suffering from respiratory and other ailments they believe were caused by the attack.

Obama's primary opponent, Sen. Hillary Clinton, has led the fight in the Senate to get a measure passed, although she has not introduced a new bill. She is working on a bill that can pass the Senate, but advocates don't expect it to be introduced until next year.

A House version of the bill failed to pass last weekend when Mayor Mike Bloomberg withdrew his support after raising objections to the city's financial obligations (\$30 million after 9/11 House bill fails).

The New York Times reported that Obama and Clinton spoke at length on the Senate floor Wednesday during the debate on the Wall St. bailout package, but it's unclear if the 9/11 health bill was discussed.

Eric Bederman, a Clinton spokesperson, released this statement: "Senator Clinton continues to work with her colleagues on the HELP Committee to develop a bipartisan long-term solution for the health needs faced by responders, workers, volunteers, residents, students and others who were affected by the World Trade Center attacks."

Catherine McVay Hughes, a Lower Manhattan resident who has worked with Clinton's office on 9/11 health concerns, said: "I would have been surprised if Sen. Obama did not support the bill but it's terrific that he's formally committed to supporting it at this particular time."

Obama's decision to support the bill does appear to have been made within the last 24 hours. Zeff did not respond to a request for comment as the Downtown Express hard copy was going to press Wednesday, or to one made a few weeks ago when Obama visited the W.T.C. on Sept. 11.

The Express contacted the campaign Wednesday after learning that Alaska Governor Sarah Palin, the Republican vice presidential nominee, expressed support for workers, volunteers and residents suffering from 9/11 when she visited the Tribute WTC Visitor Center last week.

Lee Ielpi, the center's co-founder, said Palin was taken aback when he told her of the large number of people affected.

"We have to do something to help these people," Ielpi recalls Palin saying.

Ielpi, a retired firefighter whose son was killed trying to rescue people from the towers, spent months searching for his son and other people killed in the attack.

Palin's parents may have been exposed to toxic W.T.C. debris when they volunteered at the Fresh Kills landfill after 9/11. W.T.C. material was taken to Fresh Kills after it was searched for human remains.

Palin did not say she would support the bill. A McCain-Palin campaign spokesperson told Downtown Express a few weeks ago that Sen. John McCain would consider a proposal to provide health care for 9/11 ailments once a bill is introduced in the Senate.

Ielpi said he also spoke with Palin about the importance of each state adding the events of 9/11 to its school curriculum. Many teachers and parents are concerned about not traumatizing children, but Ielpi said by that logic, the Holocaust would also not be taught. He said Palin was very receptive to that idea too.

"She was 100 percent for enlightenment," he said. "Regardless of the outcome of the election, that's very, very meaningful for someone from the state that's furthest from the city."