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Cleanup workers have respiratory problems

By CLEM RICHARDSON
Daily News Staff Writer

Dr. Steven Markowitz expected to serve about 200 people when the World Trade Center Medical Monitoring for Building Clean Up Workers van opened its doors at Barclay St. and Broadway on Jan. 14.

Ten days later more than 150 people, most of them immigrants, had been examined and 400 more were on a waiting list for free respiratory screenings, said Markowitz, director of Queens College's Center for the Biology of Natural Systems.

Between a quarter and a third of the screened workers had "significant respiratory affect" such as coughs, shortness of breath, sore throats, dizziness and headaches from their weeks of cleaning contaminated twin towers dust from lower Manhattan homes and office buildings, he said.



Turnbull NEWS

Dr. Steven Markowitz is helping to provide free respiratory screenings for workers at Ground Zero.

It gets worse: Though workers are examined and given free respirators, they don't get treatment from Markowitz's team.

"We tell them that we expect the symptoms will abate over time," Markowitz said. "But we honestly can't tell people how long those symptoms will last, if they will ever be 100% again or what the long-term effects of their exposure will be."

Markowitz thinks the walk-in clients represent only a fraction of those affected. No one knows how many cleaning companies were hiring workers to cash in on the booming business downtown.

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One company Markowitz contacted said it hired 1,800 temporary workers immediately after Sept. 11. Now it employs 50.

The rest have vanished, and that's bad.

"Time really matters here," Markowitz said. "These people should be seen sooner rather than later. But we have no idea how many people did this work."

"The police, firefighters and emergency workers were connected to some institution that would provide what they needed" to safeguard their health, Markowitz added.

"Day laborers are less likely to get attention. They don't have a union. Their relationship with their employer is very temporary. They don't have ready access to doctors.

"Even if they went to their doctors, it's unlikely the doctors would know what are acceptable levels of exposure to some of the contaminants mixed in with the World Trade Center dust."

Asbestos, lead, PCBs and fiberglass have all been found in the dust that coated lower Manhattan and parts of Brooklyn and Staten Island after the Trade Center collapsed.

Markowitz, an epidemiologist, joined with the New York Committee for Occupational Safety and Health and the Latin American Workers Project to provide the free respiratory screenings.

The groups got an \$80,000 grant from the United Way's September 11th Fund. "When we got there,[fund officials] were looking for good causes to support, so getting the money took no time at all," Markowitz said.

The groups paid \$5,000 a week to rent a van from Boston that was already equipped to perform occupational screening and put in a staff of seven.

Some good news is that Markowitz said doctors are not seeing much asthma or airway diseases that could cause the patients to develop asthma.

Still, many of the cleaners stopped working downtown four to six weeks ago and still have symptoms.

"Very few people we are seeing were given respirators or taught how to use them," Markowitz said.

"Given the uncertainty of what is in that dust, certainly people should have been given the proper equipment to clear these areas. Measures should have been taken to protect these people from exposure."

"I'm concerned about what we are going to see in these people in the coming months," he said. "And I would be concerned about working in some of the buildings downtown."

"Some of the work may not have been done properly and there could be residual contamination."

Markowitz is seeking more money to keep the van open.

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