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Big Cost Increase Is Predicted to Treat Ground Zero Workers

By ANTHONY DePALMA

New federal planning documents suggest that the money needed to treat ailing ground zero workers could soar to \$20 million a month by the end of this year, up from about \$6 million a month now.

The documents, prepared by the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health, present one of the most comprehensive cost estimates of ground zero health issues. They project that costs will rise because the number of recovery workers getting sick is increasing, and their illnesses are becoming more severe.

The increased costs would mean that the \$50 million for monitoring and treatment proposed by a House subcommittee for the federal budget for next year, which the full House is set to vote on this week, would be far from adequate.

The new estimates, which have not been published, are based on monthly records of treatment provided by the [Mount Sinai Medical Center](#) and four other metropolitan area clinics in New Jersey, Long Island, Queens and Bellevue Hospital Center, which are part of a medical consortium that has been treating ground zero workers.

Among the factors driving the cost increase are the large number of workers still registering for screening and treatment. Since the fifth anniversary of the attack last September, about 500 workers a month have been signing up with the monitoring and treatment programs, more than at any time since early 2004.

The total number of workers registered, including firefighters, now exceeds 37,000 and could go as high as 65,000 in two years, according to the documents. That would strain the programs, which are already short of doctors and so busy that newly registered workers must wait more than three months to be examined.

Records show that about half of the workers entering the program now receive treatment for ground zero-related physical health problems, like [asthma](#) and other respiratory ailments. About a quarter of them are treated for stress-related mental problems.

According to the documents, the workers coming into the programs now tend to have illnesses that appear to be more intense than in previous years, in part because many of them have waited so long to be examined that their conditions have worsened.

The planning documents were provided to The New York Times by a Congressional staff member who

favors greater health care financing for people exposed to the trade center dust.

A different government official, who worked on the documents but was not authorized to speak about them and declined to be identified, said they show a deteriorating health situation and inadequate financing.

“The bottom line is that people are ill and they’re not getting better,” the official said.

But the dire picture presented in the planning documents is not universally accepted within the federal government. While several studies have shown that many recovery workers developed respiratory and gastrointestinal problems after working at ground zero, a link between exposure to the dust and life-threatening diseases has not been conclusively proved.

Officials at the [Department of Health and Human Services](#), which oversees the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health, have not made a forceful case for more financing from Congress.

A spokesman for the department declined to comment, saying she was not aware of the documents. Officials at the New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene also declined to comment.

Starting in 2002, the federal government provided money for screenings, but not treatment (at that time, some limited financing for treatment was provided by the Red Cross). In 2004 Washington provided money for a monitoring program, through which workers could be tracked over time. Since then, there have been two supplemental or emergency appropriations to keep the programs going.

Starting in January, federal money became available for the first time for treatment for three categories of illnesses: aerodigestive (like asthma or reflux disorders), psychological and musculoskeletal (like lower back problems). The treatment programs exclude cancers and all other illnesses.

Federal officials estimate that the current average annual cost of treating recovery workers is about \$8,000. For workers with physical ailments, most of that cost is for diagnostic tests and prescription drugs needed to manage diseases like asthma. Treatment for stress-related psychological problems includes some medication and weekly office visits.

The treatment cost per worker could go as high as \$10,500 a year in two years, according to the documents. And if cancers are treated, costs will escalate drastically.

Currently, about 19 percent of the 37,000 workers in the combined monitoring and treatment programs have respiratory and gastrointestinal problems, but that number could rise to nearly 50 percent if trends accelerate.

The percentage of workers with psychological problems is also expected to rise. Currently, 14 percent of workers have some kind of stress-related mental condition. That is expected to increase to 20 percent, and possibly as high as 26 percent, according to the planning documents.

Only the basic musculoskeletal injuries, like slipped discs, are expected to remain steady at about 1

percent of registered workers.

The annual cost for ground zero health care, including administrative and data collection expenses, is calculated to be \$195 million by the end of this year, an estimate that assumes that expenses will increase as the treatment program becomes better established. The unpublished documents predict that over the next two years total costs are likely to increase to \$428 million and could soar to as much as \$712 million a year if more people come in and a higher percentage of them need treatment.

This week, the House of Representatives is expected to vote on putting \$50 million for the treatment program at the consortium clinics into the 2008 budget. The Senate is considering a slightly larger amount and wants to cover other groups, including residents, that were exposed to trade center dust.

Earlier this year, a report issued by Mayor [Michael R. Bloomberg](#) estimated that medical care for ground zero victims could reach \$392 million a year. That figure was widely seen as being driven by Mr. Bloomberg's recent attempts to get the federal government to assume greater responsibility for sick workers.

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