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Health Tracking for Ground Zero Rescue Personnel Should Cover All Residents and Workers in Lower Manhattan

Nationwide Health Tracking Network Needed For All Communities and Chronic Disease Concerns

Washington, DC – A national health advocacy group today said funds included in the Senate supplemental spending bill to monitor the health of Ground Zero rescue workers should be used to track the health of all people who live and work in Lower Manhattan. The Trust for America's Health (TFAH) also said these health tracking efforts should be incorporated into the nationwide health tracking network currently under development.

The \$90 million for health tracking of firefighters and other relief workers was cited yesterday by the Bush Administration as one reason for a potential veto of the spending bill. Although the Administration said it appreciated the support for additional disaster relief efforts in New York, it was concerned that the funds would be transferred from the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) to support the tracking.

A new public opinion survey released today by TFAH showed overwhelming support among Manhattanites for health tracking for both relief workers (90% support, 76% support strongly) and those who live and work in lower Manhattan (90% support, 74% support strongly).

“We absolutely should track and monitor the health of all New Yorkers, but we also must put a nationwide health tracking network in place,” said Dr. Shelley Hearne, executive director of TFAH. “In New York and across the country, we don't have consistent, comparable information on environmental factors and their potential links to chronic illnesses like cancer and asthma. With nationwide health tracking, we'd have this information for every community with questions and concerns about disease clusters or other illnesses.

“For example, we don't know the rates of asthma in New York's children. Is the asthma epidemic higher in some parts of New York, and if so, how could we prevent it? These were concerns long before the attacks, and we still don't have the basic tools and information to support better prevention efforts,” Hearne said.

A nationwide health tracking network would cost an estimated \$275 million annually – less than \$1 per American.

In its fiscal year 2003 budget request, the Bush Administration made chronic disease tracking and monitoring of environmental exposures a “major focus” of the CDC, although they didn’t propose a specific dollar amount.

Surveys Show Strong Support for Health Tracking

On the same day that news stories reported the Administration’s threatened veto of the spending bill, TFAH released a public opinion survey that showed strong support among Manhattanites for a system to monitor exposures to environmental health threats and the incidence of chronic health problems like cancer, asthma and birth defects that may result from those threats. Overwhelming majorities support such a system for both relief workers (90% support, 76% support strongly) and those who live and work in lower Manhattan (90% support, 74% support strongly).

The Mellman Group conducted the telephone survey of 500 residents living on or south of Manhattan’s Canal Street from May 2-6, 2002. The statistical margin of error for the sample as a whole is +/- 4.4 percentage points; the margin of error for subgroups is larger.

Legislation introduced in the Senate by Sens. Hillary Clinton (D-NY), Harry Reid (D-NV), and Edward Kennedy (D-MA), and in the House by Reps. Nancy Pelosi (D-CA), Peter King (R-NY), Louise Slaughter (D-NY), and Stephanie Tubbs Jones (D-OH) would create a nationwide health tracking network (S. 2054 and H.R. 4061).

The health tracking network also has been supported by Congress with an initial down payment of \$17.5 million in fiscal year 2002 for state pilot programs.

More than 80 health, public health, environmental and public interest groups support nationwide health tracking, including the American Public Health Association and the American Heart Association.

Trust for America’s Health, www.healthyamericans.org