

AP Analysis: 9/11 health issue tests Clinton's clout

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WASHINGTON - Sen. Hillary Rodham Clinton and her fellow New York Democrats will soon face a major test of their clout in Congress: whether they can deliver health care to sick ground zero workers.

For years, New York politicians _ none more prominent than Clinton _ have blasted President Bush for not doing enough to treat those who are sick years after working on the toxic rubble of the World Trade Center.

Now that Democrats are the majority in Congress and Clinton is the party's presidential front-runner, there is new hope among ground zero workers for health care _ and compensation.

"I've been getting a lot of questions from first responders lately. The interest level is way up," said ground zero demolition supervisor John Feal, who lost part of a foot at the site and has become an activist and organizer among the thousands of former Sept. 11 workers.

"Some of them think a pile of money is going to fall out of the sky and help them with their bills," said Feal. "I'm not saying give everyone a million dollars, but damn, I want what I had on Sept. 10."

Many of those who got sick after toiling at ground zero, particularly construction workers and volunteers with spotty or nonexistent health insurance, face mounting medical bills. To date, the government has provided piecemeal funding to support testing and treatment, but advocates say it isn't enough.

Clinton has authored legislation to pay \$1.9 billion in health care, and supports a separate measure by New Jersey Sen. Robert Menendez to reopen the Sept. 11 victim compensation fund.

Yet, the more time passes, the more of her time is spent on the campaign trail, and it is unclear how much energy she will commit to pushing difficult Sept. 11 legislation through the Senate.

Sick ironworker John Sferazo said he worries Clinton's prominence on the issue is "a double-edged sword."

"Some people don't like this woman," he said. "Me, personally, I used to be skeptical of her, but I know this senator will not let this get swept under the rug."

Asked what Clinton's role will be on the issue as she runs for president, her spokesman Philippe Reines said she will "continue to do all that she can to work with her colleagues in Congress." Reines also said the Bush administration, "must stop dragging its feet."

Blaming Bush is a common refrain in New York, and some Democrats have also used the Sept. 11 health issue as a cudgel against Republican presidential candidate Rudy Giuliani. They contend that, as mayor, he ignored workers' health.

Two more congressional hearings on the subject are scheduled this week, but hearings don't pay for doctor visits, and it's the Democrats who are passing the budget bills now.

On that front, New York just got some welcome news: During a visit to the city last week, House Speaker Nancy Pelosi said she supported legislation providing treatment to ground zero workers, though she did not commit to any particular plan or dollar amount.

Manhattan Rep. Carolyn Maloney said Pelosi's comments are evidence that momentum is building.

"A big part of that is that Democrats are the majority now, but I don't see this as a test. I see it as a moral obligation," said Maloney.

Any Sept. 11 health bill would have to overcome Democrats' worries about cost. Many believe 9/11 health care will devour hundreds of millions of dollars a year. Clinton, Maloney, and the other lawmakers are trying to create a long-term program that would presumably cost billions of dollars.

That means it might have a greater chance of success if it is attached to an emergency spending bill, the kind that has been frequently used to pay for military costs in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Another particularly thorny element is what sick first responders want most: to reopen the Sept. 11 victim compensation fund. The fund shut down in 2004 after handing out \$6 billion to the families of those killed in the attacks. Another \$1 billion went to the injured.

Since many ground zero workers did not exhibit serious illnesses until after the fund closed, some, including the fund's former special master, say it is only fair to reopen it for ill latecomers.

But the fund was controversial to start with, because it assigned varying dollar amounts _ paid by taxpayers _ to individual lives based partly on how wealthy they were.

Trying to re-create that morally treacherous maze could also lead to claims in Congress that victims of other tragedies _ from hurricanes to tornadoes to the Virginia Tech shooting _ are just as deserving of compensation.

"It is going to be hard for Washington to do it, but it's the right thing, and they should," said Justin Green, a lawyer who represented many claimants to the original victim fund.