



July 9, 2008

Armed forces, first responders need federal aid after doing their duty

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Journal News columnist

The Army medic carrying a wounded Iraqi boy to safety in one of the most memorable photos of the war died late last month of an apparent drug overdose.

Joseph Dwyer, a Long Island native who enlisted two days after the Sept. 11 attacks, had been struggling with depression, substance abuse and other signs of post-traumatic stress disorder since his return from Iraq.

"Every second that goes by, there is another soldier just like Joseph," his mother, Maureen Dwyer, told Newsday. "Another family can't go through this. All the politicians talk so great about the soldiers, about patriotism, but mental illness is something they are not putting enough into."

On the day her interview was published, a federal advocate for sick Ground Zero workers was dismissed.

Dr. John Howard, the director of the National Institute of Occupational Safety and Health, was let go when his term expired Saturday, despite protests from members of New York's congressional delegation, its two senators and its governor.

Howard had clashed with the Bush administration over his support for screening, monitoring and treating Ground Zero workers, and the announcement of his departure was terse in the extreme.

"Today, Dr. Julie Gererding met with Dr. John Howard and let him know that (U.S. Health and Human Services/national Centers for Disease Control) will begin a search for a new NIOSH director," it began.

Not until the end of the short statement was he thanked for his service to the country.

Howard has been a champion of government benefits for workers who got sick at the World Trade Center. That put him at odds with an administration disinclined to provide extended funding for the men and women who searched for bodies and cleaned up the debris of the demolished buildings. He will continue for a short time as a consultant to the Centers for Disease Control.

Dwyer, 31, was photographed by the Army Times in the first week of the war. His unit was moving north along the Euphrates River as it was attacked by Iraqi soldiers. The young boy, Ali, got caught in the crossfire and his leg was broken. When the shooting stopped, his father ran forward with him, calling for help. Dwyer took the boy in his arms and he later told USA Today: "The kid was doing all right. I could feel him breathing real hard. ... He didn't cry one bit, and you know he was a cute little kid. He was scared though."

His parents, interviewed by USA Today, thought the young boy would come to appreciate what Dwyer had done.

"It shows the basics of what we're all about," said Dwyer's father, Patrick.

"We're just so proud of him," his mother said.

But after his return, Dwyer fought delusions that he was still battling Iraqis. He slept in a closet armed with knives; he once held police off after firing at imaginary attackers. He got treatment from Veterans Affairs doctors but his anxiety and depression continued. The military does not allocate enough resources for post-traumatic stress disorder, his parents said. On June 28, he collapsed and died after taking prescription pills and inhaling a computer cleaner aerosol.

Howard lost his job a week later. Yesterday, Sens. Charles Schumer and Hillary Rodahm Clinton were continuing to call for his term to be extended and asking why he had been removed from his post.

His departure would jeopardize existing health programs, ones for people other than emergency responders, and planned nationwide monitoring and treatment of emergency workers, they said.

"We cannot afford any delays in our efforts to help these programs reach all of those who continue to suffer lingering health effects from 9/11," they wrote to Michael O. Leavitt, the secretary of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

David Worby is a White Plains lawyer representing more than 10,000 workers claiming in lawsuits that they were not properly protected from the toxic dust at Ground Zero. In the years since, they have reported a broad range of ailments, including respiratory and gastrointestinal sickness and cancers - though lawyers for New York City have disputed the seriousness of some of the claims.

Worby said Howard visited him at his office about two years ago to review the material he had collected.

"John came with two of his assistants and we spent a couple of hours together going over what was happening statistically and the clusters of cancers that we were seeing, in particular the blood cell cancers," Worby said.

Treatment for the workers could run as high as \$400 million a year.

The cost of post-traumatic stress disorder and depression among returning service members will be even higher, \$6.2 billion in the two years following deployment, according to a Rand Corp. study. The price includes medical care and the cost of lost productivity and suicide.

But if we want men and women to fight our wars, to step forward when the country is attacked, we must take care of them when they get sick. We cannot neglect them because the price is too high - whether soldiers such as Joseph Dwyer or the workers from Ground Zero.
