

Lawyer fights to prove 9/11 link after 'Angel of Ground Zero' dies



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A nun who spent months at the site of the September 11, 2001 attacks in New York, comforting relatives of the dead and blessing body parts, has died of lung disease, her lawyer said.

David Worby said there was no doubt in Sister Cindy Mahoney's mind that she had contracted her respiratory illness from sifting through the rubble of the World Trade Center, and he said he would fight to prove the link.

Mahoney, 54, knew she was dying and requested a thorough autopsy be carried out after her death to prove that her symptoms -- like those of thousands of people who worked at the site -- were linked to working there.

"She said that considering the rest of the city was just calling this a cough and wasn't recognizing the severity, she wanted to make sure that when she died I was personally responsible for having an appropriate autopsy and pathology report" carried out, Worby told AFP.

Five years after the attacks, thousands of workers, residents and rescuers have reported respiratory problems that scientists believe to be linked to the fine particles released from the debris and inhaled deep into the lungs.

Several lawsuits have been filed, notably against the Environmental Protection Agency, which assured residents that the air quality at Ground Zero was safe a week after the attacks.

New York authorities have also come under fire for not forcing people to wear respirators during the recovery and clean-up operations.

An autopsy carried out on a 34-year-old police officer in January for the first time established an official link between respiratory complaints and the hours workers spent sifting through the rubble at Ground Zero.

But Worby said that while some officials had challenged the findings, Mahoney's case was more clear cut, since she had no history of working in hazardous environments -- unlike the emergency workers who had fallen ill.

"What's stronger about Sister Cindy's case is that, unlike firemen and unlike police officers ... this is a South Carolina nun whose lungs have never been exposed to even one cigarette," he said.

The first results of her autopsy are expected next week.

A medical study released in September found a high incidence of respiratory problems in September 11 rescuer workers and warned that many had sustained serious and lasting damage.

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