

Statement of Barbara Burnette
of Bayside, New York
Before the United States House of Representatives
Committee on Energy and Commerce Committee
Subcommittee on Health
Regarding H.R. 1786
James Zadroga 9/11 Health and Compensation Reauthorization Act
of 2015
June 11, 2015

Thank you, Committee Chairman Upton, Ranking Member Pallone, Subcommittee Chairman Pittman, Ranking Member Green, and Members of the Subcommittee on Health, for inviting me to appear before you today.

My name is Barbara Burnette. I live in Bayside, New York. I am 52 years old, a wife, a mother, and a grandmother. With me here today are my husband, Lebro, Sr., and my son, Lebro, Jr.

I am a proud, former New York City Police Detective. I retired from the department after 18 and a half years of service. My career came to an end because of illnesses I developed from the time I served at the World Trade Center site. I served there for more than three weeks, about 23 days in total.

The morning of September 11, 2001, I was working in Brooklyn, New York. I had been assigned to the Police Department's Gang Intelligence Division. When my fellow officers and I

learned that morning of the terrorist attacks in New York City, we rushed to lower Manhattan the fastest way possible. We took boats. We arrived at the piers near the West Side Highway. We arrived around the time the Towers had collapsed.

The air was thick with dust and smoke. I had to place my hands over my mouth and nose just to breathe. That first day, I worked for about 12 straight hours in these difficult, almost impossible conditions. My fellow officers and I worked all day and well into the night. We evacuated people from around the World Trade Center site. We directed them away from the disaster. There was so much dust, I had to wash my eyes out frequently, with running water.

I was not given any respirator or any kind of protection for my eyes, throat and lungs. To wash dust and debris out of my eyes, mouth and throat throughout the day, my only choice was to pick up a hose and let the muddy, dirty water run out of my mouth and onto the ground. At one point, Emergency Medical Services rinsed out my eyes with bottled water. My eyes were irritated, swollen and dark red in color.

My fellow officers and I, along with all the rescue workers and First Responders, could not stop doing what we had to do. That first night, I finally left the World Trade Center site around 10 p.m.

Five hours later, I reported back to the World Trade Center. I arrived for work at 4 in the morning on September 12th. We were assigned directly to the debris pile on the second day. I worked until late afternoon, removing debris, by hand and by using buckets and shovels. At no time was I provided with any type of respiratory protection. Like the day before, I had to run water into my mouth and throat to wash away the dust and debris and then spit it out. My eyes needed constant rinsing. If I was not crying over what I was seeing in the ruins, tears streamed down my face from the burning, irritating dust.

I spent weeks at the World Trade Center site in this routine: shoveling; clearing away debris; searching for survivors; and later, sifting for body parts of the dead. We worked side by side and hand in hand with iron workers and construction workers who worked as contractors for the City of New York. The firefighters, the police officers, the construction workers, all of us searched in the dust and removed debris together.

For all of us, no matter what our job was, each day was pretty much the same. We made our way across all parts of the World Trade Center, which was a rectangle in shape, all debris, from north to south, east to west. There were no landmarks or street signs left. All I knew is that we were searching and removing wreckage of the World Trade Center. We were working right on top, on the burning, smoky, hot rubble.

These conditions did not change during my time on the debris pile. The fires never stopped burning. There was constant dust and debris flying around. Air quality, we were told was not a concern. All of us were allowed to continue to work 24 - 7. The work was tough and dirty, it would cause choking and it was dangerous. But there was never a time when I even thought about quitting and leaving. I thought of the thousands of poor victims, including my fellow Police Officers. I thanked God that I was not one of them. If our energy and toil brought the removal and recovery efforts closer to completion, we were glad to contribute. There were those who should have taken the necessary precautions to protect all of us from the exposure to dust. All I know is that we held up our end of the deal.

I live with the consequences of 9-11 every day. I have been diagnosed with interstitial lung disease, more specifically hypersensitivity pneumonitis with fibrosis in my lungs. I have failed the pulmonary function tests that doctors have given me. The inflammation in my lungs interferes with my breathing and destroys the tissues that get oxygen to my blood. My lungs are permanently

scarred. I cannot move around my home without wheezing or gasping for breath. I take large doses of steroids that add to my weight. I start each morning connecting to a nebulizer and inhaling multiple doses of medications. I am told I will eventually need a lung transplant.

Long term steroid use and other prescription medications have caused me to have many additional illnesses. I have been diagnosed with diabetes, high blood pressure, osteoarthritis and rheumatoid arthritis. I have suffered partially detached retinas in both eyes each requiring laser surgery.

Prior to my World Trade Center service, I was in top shape. I had no history of lung disease. I never smoked. I always had a physically demanding lifestyle and career. During my time with the NYPD, I worked for 5 years in the plainclothes narcotics unit. These assignments required me to walk up to 4 miles per day, standing ready to make arrests in buy-and-bust operations and the execute search warrants. Making an arrest is tough, intense and physical. I have made over 200 arrests in my career and have assisted in hundreds more. I have been recognized by the NYPD numerous times for Excellent Police Duty. I have also received several medals for Meritorious Police Duty.

I was born and raised in Brooklyn, New York. I played high school and college basketball. I played on the Police League women's team which competed across the United States and internationally. We won 4 championships.

Life has been very different since I became sick. I cannot walk up the stairs or down the street without gasping for breath. It seems a long time ago that I arrested drug dealers or did most police work. Simply walking is difficult for me now. Because of my illness, sometimes I black out. That is why I avoid driving. I rely on my husband, family and friends to get me where I need to go. In September of 2004, while working full duty, I experienced a blackout at work. There was

no explanation for this episode. I underwent many medical tests. In May 2005, having discovered inflammation in my bronchial passages, doctors at the Mount Sinai Medical Center performed two bronchoscopies and an open lung biopsy. Granulomas, abnormal tissue formations were detected in my lungs and I was placed on daily doses of Prednisone to fight the inflammation. My condition worsened.

I soon realized that I would never go back to work full duty as a Detective for the NYPD. On August 11, 2006, the Police Department agreed. Department doctors determined that I was permanently disabled with illnesses resulting from exposure at the World Trade Center site. The James Zadroga 9-11 Health and Compensation Reauthorization Act is a lifesaver for me and thousands of other first responders and 9-11 survivors. Every day we fight serious health issues resulting from our exposure to toxic smoke, dust and debris from the World Trade Center site. Recently, more than 60 types of cancers have been identified by medical researchers as being directly related to the toxins found at Ground Zero. The Zadroga Bill enables me to participate in the Mount Sinai Medical Center's World Trade Center Health Program and medical monitoring.

Every month I see the doctors at Mount Sinai to receive care and to renew my prescriptions. This program saves lives. It is saving my life. It provides a medical structure in my life by coordinating doctors and medications. My family does not have to suffer the financial burden of doctor visits, co-payments, deductibles and the terrible costs of prescription medication which I know would not be available to me without the program.

I would note that our health conditions are worsening. Many of my First Responder colleagues have been diagnosed with cancer. Many colleagues have died of cancer. The amount of dust to which we were exposed was unprecedented. Many, many of us fear cancer and other injuries that may arise late, after toxic exposure.

For these reasons, I would urge the committee to approve the bipartisan legislation before it.

I would be happy to answer your questions. Thank you for the hearing.