

PALLONE STATEMENT AT HEALTH SUBCOMMITTEE HEARING ON 9/11 HEALTH EFFECTS

September 18, 2007

"Good morning. Today the Subcommittee is meeting to discuss an issue of great importance, medical monitoring and treatment of 9/11 health effects, which is the first time ever the Subcommittee is meeting to hear about these issues. We had originally intended to hold this hearing last Tuesday, on the anniversary of the 9/11 attacks, but due to a change in the House's schedule we were forced to move the hearing to today.

"It is hard to believe that it has been six years since the attacks on the World Trade Center and Pentagon. It was an event that affected our country deeply, and continues to have an impact on all of us--especially those who participated in the rescue, recovery and restoration efforts.

"It's important that we as a nation recognize the extraordinary sacrifice of everyone who responded to the terrorist attacks and worked tirelessly in the hours, days, weeks, and months after 9/11 to help those in need and to begin clearing the site of the tragedy.

"From first responders, to iron workers, to crisis counselors --Americans from across the country put their lives on hold and rushed to the site of the World Trade Center on the day of the attack and stayed for months after in order to assist with the recovery efforts. It's been estimated that more than 40,000 people responded to the crisis and participated in rescue, recovery, clean up, or restoration of essential services. We are indebted to them for their efforts.

"Six years later, these brave men and women who helped lift our nation up from one of its darkest hours are now in need of our help. Many of those who responded to the attacks on the World Trade Center have since been plagued by health problems. One of every eight responders has experienced symptoms of post-traumatic stress. They have developed asthma at 12 times the rate of other Americans.

"Nearly one in five has a respiratory or gastrointestinal illness as a result of their exposure to toxins. I've seen the impact first-hand: more than 1,000 responders are currently receiving health services through the monitoring and treatment clinic in my home district in New Jersey. Furthermore, residents, workers, and students who were in the area at the time of the attack are also experiencing high rates of health problems.

"Unfortunately, for too long, their concerns have been ignored here in Washington. But that must change. As Chairman of the Health Subcommittee, I won't let these issues be ignored any longer. I want to be sure that there are accessible health programs in place for responders, and adequate funding for those programs. We are here today to ensure that those who are suffering from health problems have access to the monitoring and treatment services they are entitled to as a result of the conditions they endured at Ground Zero.

"We should be honest about the task in front of us. It is a big undertaking for us to ensure that adequate care is provided to those in need. But that is a responsibility we must fulfill. The cost of screening for and treating these illnesses, estimated at \$8000 annually per person, and expected to increase in the coming years. This cost should not be borne by the thousands of responders, workers, and health professionals who risked their health to do their jobs.

"But this is not a job solely for Congress. The Administration has an important role to play here as well. Unfortunately, for the past six years, the Bush Administration has been dragging its feet on this issue. It's sad to say, but I think many of those who came to our aide in the days after 9/11 feel as though this administration has failed to live up to promises that it has made over the last couple of years to not leave them behind.

"This is the first year that the administration proposed funding in its annual budget, in the amount of \$25 million, for the health care needs of World Trade Center responders. The Democratic House did not think that was enough, and we doubled the president's request to \$50 million in our budget.

"The administration said that the initial \$25 million was only a beginning, and that it would propose additional funds once it had a comprehensive plan in place. That comprehensive plan has yet to appear. But in a draft plan developed by the administration, they acknowledge that the current cost estimate for the program is nearly \$200 million each year, and that it's possible the cost could reach \$712 million annually.

"This is why I joined with members of the New York Congressional delegation and sent a letter to HHS Secretary Leavitt two weeks ago asking that they finalize their plans immediately. We need a plan in place so that we can help treat and monitor all of the people whose health was impacted by 9/11. We also sent another letter to new OMB Director Jim Nussle asking that he live up to his predecessor's promises and request the necessary funds to continue the process of helping these workers. I ask that these letters be made part of today's hearing record.

"Today we'll be hearing from a variety of people about the medical monitoring and treatment of health effects caused by the exposure to traumatic events and harmful materials. It is my hope that this hearing will shed some light on the problem, and help us begin rectifying the situation. I hope we can also develop a legislative proposal that all of us can support, and that will provide those who have had their health affected by the 9/11 attacks the monitoring and treatment services they deserve.

"I would like to thank the witnesses for appearing before us today and sharing their stories with us. I now recognize my colleague from Georgia, Mr. Deal, for five minutes for his opening statement."