



THE SECRETARY OF VETERANS AFFAIRS
WASHINGTON

March 4, 2008

The Honorable Carolyn B. Maloney
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Congresswoman Maloney:

Thank you for your letter co-signed by Congressmen Christopher Shays and John Hall. I share your concern about veterans who may have been exposed to hazardous materials following the terrorist attack on the World Trade Center, September 11, 2001. The veterans who assisted in the World Trade Center disaster are heroes in the fight against terrorism.

I understand that there are concerns about potential long-term health problems from exposures to the wide range of hazardous materials that were produced by this terrorist event. The World Trade Center Medical Monitoring and Treatment Program evaluates those potentially affected. Most health concerns have focused on respiratory problems, but a wide range of medical and psychological health problems have also been attributed to exposures at Ground Zero.

A service member who served on active duty, inclusive of activated Reservists or National Guard members who were activated by Presidential order, and who developed a respiratory or other illness possibly related to an exposure at the World Trade Center site after discharge, may apply for enrollment at any Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) health care facility. These veterans may also file a claim for any disability possibly related to service while on active military duty.

I appreciate the need to educate and inform VA health care providers about the various health issues that may be related to exposure to the wide range of hazardous materials from the 9-11 event. VA physicians are trained to provide just this type of comprehensive world-class health care.

VA's Environmental Agents Service (EAS) in the Office of Public Health and Environmental Hazards tracks environmental and occupational health issues that may affect active duty service members, including hazardous exposures related to 9-11. EAS quarterly training conference calls for VA's Environmental Health Clinicians and Coordinators, located at all VA medical centers, are used to update VA health care providers on environmental health issues. Because of the concern about potential long-term health effects from 9-11 related hazardous exposures, EAS will discuss this issue during their next (May 2008) quarterly conference call. I believe this represents an efficient means of getting the information out to those who need it.

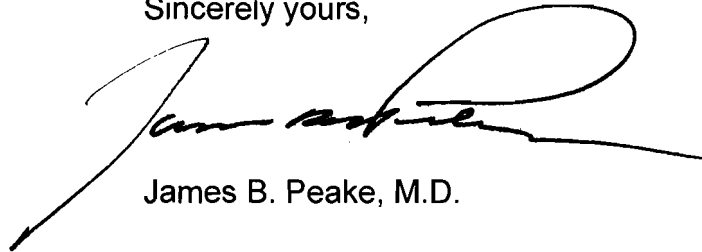
The Honorable Carolyn B. Maloney

We appreciate that some service members exposed to environmental hazards and wartime stress while on active duty may develop long-term, difficult to diagnose illnesses that are nevertheless significantly debilitating. We have seen these types of illnesses after every major war, and certainly responding to the World Trade Center disaster falls into this category. VA has established three War Related Illness and Injury Study Centers (WRIISCs), located at the VA Medical Centers in East Orange, NJ, Washington, DC, and most recently Palo Alto, CA. The WRIISCs evaluate veterans with difficult to diagnose health problems. Veterans of the World Trade Center disaster who are eligible for VA health care are eligible for participation in the specialized examination and health care provided at the WRIISCs if their primary VA physician believes that this additional care would be beneficial.

I believe that the VA health care and disability system can fully meet the needs of eligible veterans whose health may have been affected at Ground Zero by hazardous exposures. They will receive the best possible health care and assistance available from VA. We owe that to the heroes of 9-11 who served their country so bravely.

A similar letter is being provided to the other co-signers of your letter.

Sincerely yours,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "James B. Peake". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large loop at the end of the last name.

James B. Peake, M.D.