



HEALTH WATCH

c/o New York State AFL-CIO

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Secretary Robert F. Kennedy Jr.
U.S. Department of Health & Human Services
Hubert H. Humphrey Building
200 Independence Avenue, S.W.
Washington, D.C. 20201

January 12, 2026

Dear Secretary Kennedy,

9/11 Health Watch, Inc. was created by the unions, responders, survivors and others who fought diligently to get health care and compensation for those impacted by the toxins at Ground Zero.

We represent the first responders, the firefighters, police, construction workers and others who responded to the attack, along with the area residents, students and workers who were brought back to lower Manhattan as Ground Zero continued to burn.

We are dedicated to ensuring that the programs implemented under the James Zadroga 9/11 Health and Compensation Act—the September 11th Victim Compensation Fund and the World Trade Center Health Program—provide the care needed for the thousands of injured and ill 9/11 responders and survivors as the law intended.

We are asking that you remove the hiring freeze you have imposed on the World Trade Center Health Program and allow it to hire the staff it needs to ensure quality care, to allow critically needed research to go forward, and to lift your communications restrictions between the program and the 9/11 community. We also ask that you ensure that the Health Program finally announces its decisions on pending petitions to include cardiac, auto-immune and cognitive conditions to the list of covered conditions that have been delayed more than three years since being submitted.

Fifteen years ago, on January 2, 2011, the James Zadroga 9/11 Health and Compensation Act was signed into law, which created the World Trade Center Health Program.

This was the result of years of advocacy by the 9/11 community, responders, survivors and their advocates earned the bipartisan support that it continues to have for the health monitoring and treatment of those with verifiable exposures to the toxins released at Ground Zero.

The World Trade Center Health Program is now caring for over 140,000 members: responders at the World Trade Center, the Pentagon and Shanksville crash sites as well as survivors exposed to the disaster in lower Manhattan and Western Brooklyn. They now live in every State, and in 434 out of 435 Congressional districts.

Regrettably, today the World Trade Center Health Program is at risk because staffing and policy approvals have not kept up with the increased demand for services – necessary, often life-saving services that exposed, ill members rely on.

Over the last 11 months, since you took over as Secretary of Health and Human Services, you have ignored the program staffing needs, resulting in disrupting key WTC Health Program operations prescribed by Zadroga Statue.

You have fired program staff, then rehired them, then fired different program staff, and then fired the Program Director, then rehired some staff (but really didn't reinstate them). Then you finally rehired the staff and the Program Director. When you testified before Congress and were questioned about these reckless and irrational actions, you responded that the firings were "a mistake."

But you still failed to fully correct course.

After the dust cleared from your waves of firings and rehiring's, the program now has fewer staff members than when you took over in February.

The program's staffing level, which was 93 on inauguration day, and should have been expanded to the 120 staff authorized by the Office of Management and Budget, now stands at 84.

That means there are 36 vacancies, more than 25% of the 120 staff, the required minimum needed to ensure medical monitoring and treatment for the responders and survivors enrolled in the program.

This decline in staffing has occurred at the same time as program enrollment has continued to grow—by approximately 20,000 over the last two years and is now on track to increase by another 10,000 this year, a nearly 25% increase in program members.

You have created a 25% staff shortfall in the face of a 25% increase in members.

But despite the growing numbers of responders and survivors needing services, the program cannot hire the staff to meet that need because of your ongoing CDC-wide hiring freeze.

The continued staffing shortage means less staff to approve of treatment, less staff to authorize research grants and especially less staff to supervise the program's vendors and contractors, especially the program's National Provider Network (NPN), Sedgwick—which has had significant problems delivering services to 9/11 responders and survivors since the day it started work for the program.

A program cannot run effectively with more members (responders and survivors) needing services but with less staff and expect program members' care not to suffer—especially a program that depends on so many vendors and contractors who need supervision to ensure quality care—but that is exactly what is happening.

Under the Zadroga statute, the program also funds research on medical conditions caused by 9/11 toxins. We know that earlier this year you disrupted research on 9/11 cancers—canceling, then restoring, already-approved research. This year's research awards process, which normally would have started in March of 2025, still has not yet begun and we have only vague promises that it will be done this year. These grants were for medical studies related to WTC exposure. None fall into the category of grants (i.e. social "science", diversity, etc.) that have been cancelled in other programs.

Also, under the Zadroga statute there is a process for the program to consider adding new covered conditions provided certain requirements are met. For over three years, several petitions providing evidence linking new conditions to WTC exposures, including cardiac conditions, autoimmune conditions, and cognitive issues, have been pending review.

The program had announced in December 2024 that the delayed determinations would be finally announced in March of 2025 this past year, but that did not happen. We have no idea if or when in the future these determinations will be made.

The program's Responders Steering Committee, made up of representatives from Police, Fire, construction unions and other first responders, and Survivors Steering Committee made up of 9/11-affected the residents, area workers, students and their representatives had met every month with rare exception since the program was created. During 2025, there were no Steering Committee meetings until November 2025 when the first and only meetings of the year were held. At their respective meetings, Steering Committees were told that due to new approval requirements you have imposed, meetings can only be held every quarter going forward, and even that was not guaranteed. The Steering Committees are thereby prevented from providing timely meaningful input to the program, as the Zadroga law envisions.

Mr. Secretary, after the 15th Anniversary of the creation of the World Trade Center Health Program and as we approach the 25th Anniversary of the 9/11 attacks, you need to lift the hiring freeze and allow the program to hire the staff it needs to ensure quality care and ensure the research on 9/11 conditions to go forward.

The research that the Zadroga Act provides for needs to be allowed to continue.

You also need to end your communications restrictions, so that the program can communicate with the 9/11 community has it had before you became Secretary.

Finally, the program needs to finally announce its decisions on pending petitions.

We look forward to hearing your action on these issues and your commitment to 9/11 responders and survivors receiving care thru the World Trade Center Health Program.

Thank you.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'BCO', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Benjamin Chevat
Executive Director