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Feds Won't Clean WTC Fallout From City Firehouses

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Mar 12, 2003 11:49 pm US/Eastern

(1010 WINS) (NEW YORK) Gritty dust from the collapse of the World Trade

Center towers still lines the crevices, corners and cracks in lower Manhattan firehouses that federal environmental officials refuse to include in their cleanup program.

The Environmental Protection Agency has been scrubbing apartments of downtown residents who signed up for the free service but won't send crews to the four firehouses in the area, firefighters and union officials said Wednesday. The EPA maintains that firehouses aren't covered because they aren't residences.

"We need someone that knows what they're doing, not the firefighters, to come in and clean these firehouses and give us the clean bill of health so that at least from this point forward we're starting out with a clean firehouse," said Rudy Sanfilippo, a firefighters union leader.

The collapse of the 110-story twin towers blew dust into lower Manhattan buildings in layers several inches deep in some places. And for nearly a year, firehouses were full of the grime from the dirt-caked trucks that carried dusty gear and rescue workers back from digging through the more than 1 million tons of trade center rubble.

The Duane Street firehouse a few blocks north of the trade center site served as a 24-hour command center for thousands of rescue workers, volunteers and others working at the site. A steady stream of filthy workers shed their gear and collapsed on floors, in chairs and on stairwells for a moment of rest before heading out again.

"This house from the basement to the top floor was filthy. It was layered in trade center dust," said Lt. Michael Vindigni, a firefighter. "We couldn't have people sleeping on it, so the

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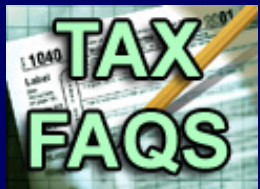
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guys would just consistently clean it with brooms, mops -- we don't have vacuums."

Environmental and public officials have disagreed on whether wet rags and mops were adequate to remove the dust; some have said that mops just push the dust around and that special vacuums and protective gear were needed to adequately remove it.

Studies also have varied on the health risks posed by the debris, which was largely a combination of pulverized glass and concrete, among other materials, that can be extremely alkaline and irritating.

Many lower Manhattan residents and ground zero rescue workers have reported continuing respiratory problems. Public and private tests detected asbestos, glass particles and other contaminants in samples from homes and work places. One recent study found that many of the particles in samples collected shortly after the Sept. 11 attack were too large to lodge deep in people's lungs.

The EPA announced in May the program to clean apartments of residents worried about the health risks, especially possible exposure to asbestos, which has been linked to cancer and other ailments. Nearly 6,000 appointments have been scheduled; 2,000 apartments have been cleaned or tested.

Jane Kenny, an EPA regional administrator, said Wednesday that cleaning the firehouses should be the city's responsibility.

"EPA's downtown cleanup program covers people's homes," she said, in a statement.

The fire department did not immediately return a call seeking comment, but officials have said that air tests in the firehouses more than a year ago showed the dust did not pose a health threat.

But 18 months after the disaster, dust in the firehouses still could be dangerous, said Peter Iwanowicz, director of environmental health for the American Lung Association's New York chapter.



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"You err on the side of caution when you're working with asbestos," Iwanowicz said. "Dust gets into all sorts of different places and can be stirred up in any matter of ways."

Rep. Jerry Nadler, D-N.Y., sent a letter on Wednesday to Kathleen Callahan, an EPA regional administrator, insisting that firehouses are residences -- because firefighters eat and sleep there -- and should be covered by the program.

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