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Sept. 11 Aid Seems To Elude the Poor

Nine long months after the World Trade Center attacks, Ying Ying Chen and the forgotten poor of lower Manhattan are tired of being ignored.



Chen, who lives on Bayard St. in Chinatown, lost her job as a garment worker after Sept. 11. On top of that, she has become increasingly desperate and exhausted from taking her 7-year-old daughter to a string of doctors for the girl's constant cough.

Both mother and daughter came down with the cough a few days after Sept. 11.

"The smell in our apartment was terrible," Chen said. "My cough finally stopped after 2 1/2 months, but no doctor has found a way to help my daughter, and I can't keep affording all the exams and drugs for her."

So yesterday afternoon Chen gathered in Chinatown's Confucius Square at Division St. near the Bowery with hundreds of other angry Chinese immigrants, most of them unemployed workers from nearby garment factories and restaurants.

They were joined by a big contingent of Hispanics and elderly whites from the housing projects of the lower East Side. It was perhaps the biggest protest so far over the government's handling of aid to victims of the attack.

"Our Health Yes, Toxic Air No," read many of the placards in Chinese, Spanish and English. "Rebuild NYC, Rebuild Our Lives" proclaimed others.

Since the attack, most of the attention and federal aid has been focused on the cleanup and rebuilding of Ground Zero, on helping major corporations dislocated by the devastation and on the plight of citizens in Battery Park City, the Financial District and Tribeca, the neighborhoods closest to the site.

But in Chinatown and the lower East Side where 10,000 low-paid garment workers lost their jobs after Sept. 11, any help has been slow in arriving, says Margaret Fung of the Asian American Legal Defense and Education Fund.

Even the controversy over air quality has overlooked Chinatown and the lower East Side. Virtually no air monitoring stations were set up by city officials or the federal Environmental Protection Agency in those neighborhoods.

But those who live there insist that they are suffering from an epidemic of respiratory problems since the attacks. Lydia Firpi, for instance, lives in the Rutgers Houses, a city Housing Authority project filled with mostly elderly tenants. "Everyone in my family is sick," Firpi says. "We all have these coughs and headaches that won't go away. Housing never came to our apartments to clean up anything."

Her 9-year-old grandson, Firpi says, is still traumatized by having watched the planes hit the buildings and by the fires that followed, yet he has received no counseling. "No one is paying attention to us," she said. "All these millions going to fix the buildings and help the big companies. What about the people who can't help themselves?"

Federal Emergency Management Agency spokesman James McIntyre attended the rally yesterday and heard the many speakers who blasted his agency. He says FEMA officials have met "at least five times" with protest organizers, who call themselves the Beyond Ground Zero Network.

"FEMA does not discriminate between groups, the rich and the poor," McIntyre said. But he conceded that there are problems in Chinatown and the lower East Side that have blocked much possible assistance.

"We are legally required to help U.S. citizens and documented aliens," McIntyre said. In addition, the federal government must have proof that a person's loss has been a direct result of the attacks.

Many people in Chinatown are in the country illegally, and a good number were paid by factory owners off the books in cash, he said. The factory owners are not eager to admit they were illegally employing anyone, much less document their employment. Some tenants even paid their landlords in cash "and had no rental agreements or leases," McIntyre said.

"All of this creates problems for us, and we are looking for creative ways to get around those requirements," McIntyre said.

Chen, Firpi and the others keep hearing about plans to rebuild Ground Zero. They hear about federal rent rebates to lure out-of-towners to live near Ground Zero. They figure nine months is enough time to wait

for someone to remember they are victims, too.

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