

Testimony  
of Dr. Michael Lonski  
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Life Matters, Inc.

**To the US Congressional Subcommittee on National Security, Emerging Threats  
And International Relations**

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Good afternoon, Mr. Chairman and sub-committee members. What is most hopeful about today's hearings is the sheer numbers of people who have joined you to understand the ongoing, devastating impact of September 11th.

Unless you live or work in New York City or have a particular interest, involvement or tolerance for understanding the depths of the pain of those so affected, you miss that each report presented at this hearing represents the personal experiences of thousands of active and retired personnel, their families and children who were directly impacted. We have heard firsthand the stories of thousands of personnel from fire, police, ironworkers, electricians, NYC agency responders, the National Guard, September 11th family members, the Chinatown immigrant population and the many who live and work within a 10-block radius of Ground Zero. Through our pro-active outreach efforts we try to link those people to all the agencies and organizations that have medical and psychological screening and treatment programs in place; programs like Dr. Stephen Levin's Mt. Sinai group and Red Cross- Life Net.

The World Trade Center attacks forever altered the way many people see the world.

The ensuing grief, trauma, stress, anxiety and despair worsened existing problems. It reactivated negative coping habits such as substance abuse, smoking and overeating. It overwhelmed people's abilities to control their emotional responses and resulted in increased violence, depression and, especially, isolation.

Just check the corner newsstand to witness the breakdown in September 11th victims' coping abilities: policemen setting bombs in train stations, firemen brawling with chairs, volunteers robbing banks, DWIs, extra-marital affairs.

People in New York are scratching their heads and wondering, will it ever end?

We're here to tell you, from a mental health standpoint, that this is just beginning.

In New York, September 11th was a mushroom cloud whose fall-out is just now making itself known.

My name is Dr. Michael Lonski, and I am a clinical psychologist and co-founder of Life Matters. With me today are Dr. Evelyn Llewellyn, a clinical psychologist, co-founder and Executive Director of Life Matters. Stephen Careaga, Executive Director of Firefighters National Trust, who so generously underwrites much of our fire union-endorsed work with active and retired emergency responders and families in the fire department of the City of New York. And board member Lou Chinal, a September 11th survivor who retired from the FDNY after 29 years and who guides and serves us.

Life Matters is a not-for-profit organization created to meet the urgent need for counseling, outreach and crisis intervention following September 11th.

We teach people to understand, cope and ultimately heal their trauma. We have "embedded" clinicians, trusted peers and support personnel in firehouses and social networks -- giving us the unique ability to quickly find and help people before they take actions that harm themselves or others.

We have helped more than 30,000 persons remain healthy, productive and involved on the job and in their lives since the terror attacks. We continue to serve an estimated 15,000 New Yorkers a year.

Let us put those numbers in perspective for you.

The Red Cross and NYS Psychiatric Institute estimate that there are between 125,000 and 150,000 Manhattan residents who have fully diagnosable post-traumatic stress disorder, or PTSD.

Mt. Sinai researchers working with Ground Zero workers say more than 40 percent are suffering from mental health issues.

A recent study by the Smithers Institute at Cornell's School of Industrial and Labor Relations found significant evidence of continued depression, stress, anxiety and grief -- and an increased risk for drinking problems -- among active FDNY members post-September 11th.

So in three years we've reached barely 20 percent of those who need our help.

Let me explain what someone suffering from post-traumatic stress goes through, and why this is a problem for us all.

PTSD sufferers move on a very predictable course from shock to upset to dysfunctionality.

Key to their trauma is the perception that the world is not a safe place, and that those in charge of protecting us have failed to do so.

They are continually flooded with uninvited thoughts, flashbacks, daydreams and reverie, nightmares and night terrors.

Everything begins to look like a threat. To protect themselves, they withdraw emotionally, buffer or medicate themselves or act out. They engage in negative behaviors to feel good, to feel alive -- or simply to feel anything at all.

They become so preoccupied with warding off reminders that they lose their perspective of right and wrong.

They fail to discriminate between external and internal triggers.

Their judgment becomes impaired.

Anyone suffering from PTSD can become a time bomb.

Their explosions and implosions rock us all.

Suicide. Domestic violence. Murder. Divorce. Criminal activity. Inappropriate sexual activity. Feared and actual debilitating disease and premature death.

The loss of the talents and contributions of people who were otherwise vital and valued members of our society.

That tragedy envelops spouses, children, family and friends.

And the cycle of trauma, grief and loss is then renewed. We lose another generation and terror wins; no further attacks, just collateral damage from the original impact.

Those in need must understand that help is available and self-help is possible.

Those in power must commit the resources required to prevent what uniformed first-responders call a "BLEVE" (boiling liquid expanding vapor explosion) -- or be prepared to suffer in the fallout.

We must rebuild victims' trust.

Help them re-connect with the world.

In our work we continue to find ways to respect people's privacy and integrity while reaching through their self-protective isolation.

Through flexible, tested and true, theoretically based pro-active outreach, education and support we walk with them to paths of health, resiliency and hope.

At issue is not just one man's unease, but a family's ability to function and ultimately, security for us all.

Our specific recommendations going forward are as follows:

Make more government funding available to pro-active and preventative outreach, educational training, referral and treatment programs. The NYS Crime Victims Board, largely through the efforts of Mr. Ron Dickens, grant supervisor, has been able to get us two rounds of funding for our efforts. In three weeks those funds will expire and 40 percent of our operating budget will disappear.

Make the sign-up procedures for medical screening and treatment so clear that everyone can follow without further frustration and angst.

Extend both the populations covered and the deadline to enable people who are just now understanding the psychological, physical and emotional impact of September 11th to register for medical screening, treatment programs and compensation cases.

Provide training for agency personnel processing those claims so they better understand the nature of traumatic stress, grief and productivity loss.

Create a national database to monitor the need for ongoing medical and psychological services for all uniformed and civilian personnel. Use this database to link those in need to the best services available given "lessons learned" from September 11th.

Provide opportunities for yearly full-body scans, if medically approved, to assuage the fears and anxieties of recovery workers and affected civilians.

Provide funding opportunities to enable groups that are ready, willing and able to collaborate for the greater good to work together to minimize the ongoing after-effects of these terror attacks. As Congressman Shays said today in his opening remarks, each day the men and women who protect the citizens of this great nation no longer just go out to work; they get ready to go to war.

They give their best. They deserve the best.