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Mother Fights for Recognition of Son's 9/11 Sacrifice

By [MICHAEL S. SCHMIDT](#)

In the days that followed Sept. 11, 2001, Dorie Pearlman of Queens tried to console herself over the loss of her son by focusing on the circumstances of his death.

He was a volunteer emergency medical technician who headed to the World Trade Center after the planes struck the towers, intending to treat the wounded. In the months that followed, the authorities would find his attaché case in a police cruiser and his body in the rubble. He was 18.

By any definition that Ms. Pearlman would use, [her son, Richard](#), was a first responder. But she has yet to successfully make that case to the federal government.

Of the hundreds of claims filed by the families of first responders who died on Sept. 11, the case of Richard Pearlman is the only one still open, according to the Department of Justice.

Under the [Public Safety Officers' Benefits](#) program, the Justice Department provides one-time payments to the families of first responders who die in the line of duty. Justice Department officials said that of the 436 applications stemming from Sept. 11 deaths, all but two were approved and the families were given \$250,000.

Ms. Pearlman's application was denied. So was a claim filed by the family members of an emergency medical technician from Virginia who happened to be in New York on Sept. 11. Officials ruled that he was not serving in an official capacity when he was killed.

Ms. Pearlman said her application was rejected for a similar reason. With some help from Representative [Anthony D. Weiner](#), she has appealed the decision.

Ms. Pearlman says she does not understand why she was rejected. She received a small sum from the [Sept. 11 Victim Compensation Fund](#), and was also recognized at a White House ceremony as the family member of a first responder who died.

"They want it both ways," Ms. Pearlman said.

She was not aware of the first responders' benefits program until a friend asked her about it two years ago. The deadline had passed, but the department extended it for her.

Ms. Pearlman said officials rejected her claim because the Forest Hills Volunteer Ambulance Corps in Queens, where her son was an emergency medical technician, was not a public agency and because she could

not prove that he had been called to ground zero by the authorities to treat the injured.

On Sept. 11, Mr. Pearlman was dropping off documents for his boss at 1 Police Plaza in Lower Manhattan when the towers were hit. Ms. Pearlman, who traced her son's steps on Sept. 11 through information from the authorities and photographs published by the news media, said there was an announcement that anyone with medical training should report to Police Headquarters so they could be taken to ground zero.

Ms. Pearlman said that after her son offered a CPR and first aid card that showed his affiliation with the Forest Hills agency, the police took him in a cruiser to the towers, where he began assisting other medical personnel.

"He got word that someone had a heart attack and, accompanied by a police officer, he went into the building," she said. "And that's when the tower collapsed."

On Tuesday, the Department of Justice held an appeals hearing for Ms. Pearlman at Mr. Weiner's district office in Queens.

Mr. Weiner, who said that he had become a "quasi advocate" for Ms. Pearlman, said he believed the original decision was a bureaucratic oversight.

"It's a case that's not tough," he said.

Mr. Weiner says Fire Commissioner [Salvatore J. Cassano](#) has agreed to send a letter to the Justice Department confirming that the Fire Department sent out a call for all emergency personnel — regardless of whether they were volunteers — to come to ground zero to help. Mr. Weiner said this would prove that Mr. Pearlman was acting on behalf of the city.

The Justice Department declined to address the specifics of the case.

"The loss of someone committed to public service is a tragedy, especially someone so young," the department said in a written statement. "Our sympathies are with Richard Pearlman's family. Mr. Pearlman acted courageously and selflessly while assisting those who were injured in the World Trade Center. Although the initial ruling was not favorable, an independent hearing officer is currently considering an appeal of this claim, and there is an opportunity for further appeal should the family wish to pursue it."

Ms. Pearlman said the hearing officer told her that he would rule on her case over the next month.

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