

For Loved Ones, Long Wait Turns to Test of Hope

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NEW YORK – As rescuers listened for signs of life in the rubble of the World Trade Center on Wednesday, hospital workers and family and friends of the victims agreed that waiting was the hard part. That, and remembering.

Evita Ortiz remembered her mother was wearing purple when she left for work the day before.

Paramedic Phil Eguiguirens kept thinking about the burning woman with no hair, running to him for help.

Jesus Marrero couldn't stop replaying the last conversation he had with his brother in which Marrero begged him to leave the building.

"He called me at 9 o'clock, and he said, 'Jesus, a plane has just hit the building, but I'm OK,'" Marrero said, tears streaming down his face. Less than 20 minutes later, another plane hit the second tower.

"We haven't heard anything," Marrero said of his brother, Jose, a fire warden who worked on the 84th floor. "He has a good heart, and he loves to help people. I know he didn't get out."

One day after terrorists slammed two airplanes into New York's World Trade Center and other into the Pentagon in Washington, hundreds of people stood outside New York hospitals, waiting in line in hopes of finding their loved ones on the lists of injured. Doctors and nurses stood outside emergency room doors, ready with gurneys and wheelchairs that saw little use.

"It's very, very slow. It's frustrating," said Dr. Anthony Gagliardi, medical director at Saint Vincent's Catholic Medical Center in Greenwich Village, the closest trauma center to the collapsed buildings.

"We want to see a lot of patients today because that means there are survivors," he said. "The only people coming in are the rescue workers who have been out there working."

Other doctors and nurses agreed. "We really hope we get as many people as we can get," said Dr. Leonard Bakalchuk. "We would love to be overwhelmed by survivors."

But by nightfall, only a handful of patients – all rescue workers who were not victims of Tuesday's attack – had been delivered to the hospital, most with eye irritation and respiratory problems caused by breathing dust as they sifted through debris in hopes of finding someone alive.

By late Wednesday, just nine survivors had been found, MSNBC reported.

In all, Saint Vincent's and its sister hospitals in the surrounding boroughs had seen fewer than 700 patients since Tuesday. They had been expecting thousands.

Frustrated with the wait and hoping to be of more assistance on-site, Dr. Andrew Feldman, an orthopedic surgeon, hitched a ride with police Tuesday morning. Three hours later, though, he returned to the hospital without having seen one patient in the field.

"There was no one I could help," he said. "There's hope, but there are a lot of body bags, a lot of body parts. And a lot of time has passed."

Around the corner from the hospital, relatives and friends of the missing passed out fliers describing their loved ones and listing phone numbers where relatives could be reached. They held photos up for the television cameras and compared notes with others in line to check lists of the injured.

"I have hope," said Denise Randolph, who was awaiting word on her cousin, Felicia Bass, who worked for a financial company on the 102nd floor of the first tower. Bass had called her husband after the plane hit her building, saying she was being evacuated to the roof, Randolph said.

"I think she could survive because she's a bossy person," she said. "She would be the one saying, 'I have a 1-year-old son, and I'm going to make it out.'"

"She might be in a hospital somewhere, in shock or unconscious."

But then she conceded that many of the missing will not be found alive.

"I checked here," Randolph said. "She's not on the list."

Family members looking for loved ones also began showing up at makeshift morgues, one of them a Brooks Brothers clothing store.

And mental-health workers counseled as many as 2,500 family members to begin accepting that many of the people they were looking for had died.

"We're trying to talk with them and work with them so they can face the likelihood that their loved ones have died," said Spencer Eth, chief of psychiatry at Saint Vincent's.

"We never want people to give up hope," he said. "However, we are facing that likelihood. They need to begin the grieving process."

In one indication of the potential death toll, Mayor Rudolph Giuliani confirmed that the city as requested 6,000 body bags from federal officials. "Yes, I believe that's correct," said the mayor.

But Evita Ortiz said she was not ready to give up.

Ortiz, 20, is the oldest of six children looking for their mother, Rosemarie Carlson.

Handing out fliers with Carlson's photo and a description that included the purple shirt and black slacks she wore to work Tuesday, Ortiz recounted how her mother, who worked on the 79th floor of the first tower, had called her at 9:40 a.m. EDT, well after her building was hit.

"She said she was waiting in her office and they were going to come and get them," Ortiz said, crying. "She said, 'I love you.'"

At 10 a.m., Carlson's friend, Linda Antretter, called her to see what happened.

"She was waiting for rescue, and she was pretty calm," Antretter said. "My mom has been sick, and she asked me twice how my mom was doing. I joked with her. I told her to meet a nice fireman. But at the end of the call, I started to hear fear. Her voice was trembling."

Since then, Antretter said, she has been calling Carlson's cell phone, which is still working.

“It rings four or five times, and then voice mail picks up,” she said. “The first time, I left her a message. Now I just call and listen to her voice.”

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