

Judiciary Committee unanimously passed a bill to address the shortfall in the September 11th Victim Compensation Fund, which provides aid to the heroes and the families of the heroes who rushed to the towers selflessly on September 11, 2001.

Even in a divided Congress, even in a divided country, this issue is an absolute issue of moral clarity. On that fateful day, the men and women of the New York Fire Department, the New York Police Department, the EMS, and the construction labor unions who rushed to Ground Zero were like our soldiers. Like our soldiers, they rushed to danger for our safety without thinking of their own, and just as we don't leave soldiers on the battlefield behind, we must not leave the brave first responders behind when it comes to their healthcare. Yet, shamefully, it has always been a struggle here in this Congress to abide by that principle.

I have lived through the years when everyone said the first responders are getting respiratory illnesses and cancers they hadn't seen in such young people. They said they were crazy for thinking that it came from the pile. I lived through the years when, even though the science eventually confirmed that 9/11 was the cause, some in Congress complained that it was too expensive to provide these heroes with the healthcare they so very needed. Then, some said: This is a New York issue, and we are not going to help—as if we care about where our soldiers come from when they die on the battlefield.

After years of struggle, we eventually passed a healthcare program, but, initially, it wasn't even permanent. We have to fight every time when there is a problem, every time we need an extension, and every time it needs more funding. It is a painful and slow process, a difficult process, one that should never have been the way it has been. Every single one of the times, those brave first responders have had to come here to testify, wheeling through the halls of Congress, their bodies riddled with cancer, to beg Senators and Congressmen to help them get their healthcare.

My good friend, my dear friend Ray Pfeiffer—God bless his memory—who knew he was dying, would come down here again and again and again, not for himself—he knew it was too late for him—but to make sure his friends and their families got the help they needed.

It is shameful—there is no other word for it; shameful—that our great first responders have had to suffer the indignity of delay after delay after delay, of searching for some must-pass bill to tuck their issue into because this Congress, this Senate, did not think it was important enough to pass it on its own.

Let me tell you something. We are done with that. We are not doing this again—not this time. The House Judiciary Committee just passed the fix to the Victim's Compensation Fund. The full House will follow suit soon.

As soon as the House passes this bill, it should be on the floor of the Senate immediately as a stand-alone bill.

Once this bill passes the House, there will be only one person who stands between the brave first responders now suffering from cancer and illness and the money they need to save or extend their lives, and that one person is Leader McConnell.

So I say to Leader McConnell: This is not politics. This is not a game. These are our heroes—American heroes who are suffering and need our help. Your help, Leader McConnell, is needed now. I am imploring, pleading, even begging to Leader McConnell to put this bill on the floor immediately after it passes the House. I am imploring, I am pleading, I am begging Leader McConnell to give us a commitment today that, as soon as the House passes this bill, he will put it on the floor of the Senate as a stand-alone bill.

Once he puts it on the floor of the Senate, it will pass the Senate with strong bipartisan support. This is not a Democratic or Republican issue. The President will sign it. The brave heroes who have come down here time and again will breathe a sigh of relief, knowing they and their families, even if they are gone, will get the help they deserve.

We will reach the point soon—most likely this year—when more will have died from 9/11 related illnesses than on 9/11 itself. It has been over 17 years since 9/11, but, unfortunately, brave Americans are still dying. Brave Americans are still finding the cancers that were caused by their rushing to the pile, but only discovering them now. Let's do our job. Let's take care of them now.

ANNIVERSARY OF PULSE NIGHTCLUB SHOOTING

Mr. President, today marks the 3-year anniversary of the Pulse nightclub shooting in Orlando, FL. On that horrible night, 49 people were killed, 53 wounded and many more forever changed in an unspeakable act of terror.

The shooting was traumatic not only as an act of brutal violence, but as a hate crime against the LGBTQ community. The shooter chose the Pulse nightclub; drove a long way specifically to Pulse. And he did it in order to target innocent people for the simple reason of being who they were.

Today, our hearts are with the victims' families, with the first responders, and with the city of Orlando. We also cannot help but remember that we are the only nation in the developed world where mass shootings happen with such regularity, many of them driven by hate. We will never be able to root out all the evil, malice, and hate in our society, but I also know that we will never see a great reduction in gun violence or in hate crimes if we do nothing. So as we remember the victims of Pulse, let us also act. Let us consider legislation to improve common sense gun safety.

We have a bill ready, sent to us by the House months ago, to fix loopholes

in our federal background check system. But Leader McConnell has not allowed it to reach the floor. Why not?

Why is it one of the many forgotten bills of his legislative graveyard? Are Republicans so unwilling to buck the gun lobby that they will ignore a bill supported of 90 percent of Americans, the majority of Republicans, the majority of gun owners? Something needs to change. My Republican friends need to break out of the vise grip of the NRA.

I urge Leader McConnell to get this Chamber working again for the good of the American people. Commonsense background checks would be a great place to start—today of all days.

HONG KONG

Mr. President, finally, 30 years and one week ago, democratic protestors gathered at Tiananmen Square, where the Chinese Communist Party brutally suppressed the will of the people.

Today, in Hong Kong, a similar scene is playing out. The Chinese government is once again showing its true colors, suppressing democracy, denying the will of the people, trying to claw back more power and control.

The people of Hong Kong are rightfully protesting the Chinese government's interest in remanding potentially innocent people to mainland China in order to put them through the corrupt Chinese prison system.

America stands with the people of Hong Kong in their protest against this blatant abuse of power by the government in Beijing.

I yield the floor.

The PRESIDING OFFICER (Mr. ROMNEY). The Senator from Alabama.

EQUALITY ACT

Mr. JONES. Mr. President, today I rise to talk about a matter that is very close to my heart and rooted in my faith and belief that we are all God's children created in God's image. It is an issue of fundamental equality, of basic human dignity, and it is consistent with the values we strive to embody as American citizens.

I stand today to honor the contributions of LGBTQ Americans—the contributions they have given so selflessly to our Nation—and to remind all of my colleagues of the great risks these Americans still face simply because of who they love and who they are.

It was 50 years ago this month that the gay community finally rose up. The Stonewall riots were a product of a brutal police force cracking down on the gay community. They found a voice that others had in the previous years. This Pride Month, June, we celebrate that 50 years of a rise in the voice of people to be treated just basically as everyone else. It is an important issue for me. It is an important issue for a number of reasons—first and foremost, because I am a father, but also, I am a product of the Deep South in which I was raised. As a kid, I came of age during a very tumultuous time in our Nation's history, a very tumultuous time in Alabama.