

No one knows how many illegal immigrants worked at Ground Zero in the days after Sept. 11. Immigration advocates claim it was thousands.

And now, as the workers have become sick, partisans on both sides cast their plight in moral terms.

"After 9/11, everybody responded with their heart," said Carmen Calderón, coordinator of Sept. 11 immigrant outreach for the New York Committee for Occupational Safety and Health. "Immigrants died in those towers. They wanted to be part of the recovery of this nation."

But when a backlash developed against the huge wave of illegal immigration, "they changed the DMV laws, and a lot of asbestos workers lost their licenses because they couldn't get a picture ID," Calderón said. "A lot of them are sick now, without work. They've lost their insurance. They lost their incomes. They lost everything."

Mark Krikorian, director of the Center for Immigration Studies, which opposes immigration increases, expressed regret for illegal immigrants who fell sick after working at Ground Zero but said they should not have been allowed to enter the country illegally.

"It tells us how harmful it is to have a policy that winks at illegal immigration and gives status to illegal aliens," Krikorian said. "If they present themselves to authorities, they should be sent home. It makes people squeamish to say this because of what happened. But this is a result of the ridiculous situation we've put ourselves in."

Moncada said fires were still burning on the streets when he showed up to volunteer in September 2001. "No one asked for papers or anything," he said. He worked with others who spoke Spanish.

Volunteers searched for survivors but found only pieces of remains.

"They had 100 people on one side, 50 people on the other, a big long line. We had to remove all the dust and the debris, the steel and metal. The machines couldn't do it because the vibrations caved everything in, so they worked by hand," Moncada said.

Andrzej, an illegal immigrant from Poland who would not give his last name because he feared deportation, worked for pay. He arrived at Ground Zero in October 2001 and took a job doing cleanup, wearing only a paper mask. "Nobody was asking me for any documents or any paper," he said. "All the time I only heard that I was doing a good job, 'Thank you.'"

Workers were paid about \$19 an hour, toiling for up to 16 hours a day. They were given buckets, mops, rags and little protective equipment as they cleared away glass, metal, dust and waste from downtown buildings that were not destroyed, advocates said.

"The ladies were smaller, so they put them in the air ducts, huge pipes," Calderón said. "They crawled in to wipe down the pipes with no masks, no gloves, nothing, not even a change of clothes."

Two years later, Moncada started to feel tired. Then he felt pain.

"My nose hurts every time I breathe," he said. "My vision is very bad. My breathing is very bad. A doctor gave me Tylenol and Advil.

"I don't want to speak to anybody. I want to stay home. I feel depressed. I can't sleep very well at night. Every day I wake up and I do nothing. I don't know what is happening to my system, my body."

Andrzej said he felt even worse. He went to an emergency room when he could not move his arms. He was admitted for a week and released with medication to control blood clotting.

"I don't work anymore," he said. "I am too sick to work. I can't speak or clearly think. I try but I have to push myself. It feels like someone is sitting on my chest. It's hard to breathe."

The New York Committee for Occupational Safety and Health estimates that 40,000 workers cleaned along Canal Street. Thousands of illegal immigrants from [China](#), Honduras, [Russia](#), [El Salvador](#), Guatemala and [Mexico](#) worked beside legal U.S. residents.

"For low-income immigrant communities where health insurance is scarce . . . this disaster magnified an already desperate situation," Calderón said. "Their choice is concrete. Do I pay my rent? Do I buy medicine? Do I put food on the table? These choices are obviously choices that some victims of Sept. 11 have to make."

In 2004, an advocacy group called Beyond Ground Zero noticed more and more immigrants getting sick. The advocates approached Bellevue Hospital and asked for help. The hospital started an unfunded program that provided care to patients, and last year the American Red Cross donated money to expand the program.

This month, Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg (R) pledged \$16 million over five years to expand the initiative further. Within two weeks, the occupational safety committee received more than 350 calls from immigrants, Calderón said. Newton said 500 people had been screened for medical examinations by her organization, and 700 people were waiting.

But the assistance may have come too late for illegal immigrants who have gone home since working at Ground Zero, advocates and workers said.

"It's going to be a challenge finding them, because undocumented immigrants move around a lot," Calderón said. "Because of some of the anti-immigrant sentiment, many of them have returned home to Mexico, to Poland. They might not hear the message."

Mike Cutler, who tracked down illegal immigrants for the Immigration and Naturalization Service, said authorities should do what they can to aid the sick. But he said they should also send home illegal immigrants and fix the dysfunctional immigration system.

"While I feel bad for people who saw Sept. 11 happen, chipped in and got sick, I would not want a blanket amnesty for them," he said. "You would wind up with millions and millions of people saying they worked at Ground Zero."