

Bridge Collapse Survivors Seek More Help

By JOSHUA FREED – 3 days ago

MINNEAPOLIS (AP) — As the estimated cost of recovering from an interstate bridge collapse surges past \$400 million, survivors of the deadly disaster just wish they could get a few thousand dollars here and there to make ends meet.

About 30 of the more than 100 people injured in the Aug. 1 collapse, which killed 13 people, meet weekly to talk about the troubles it's caused them. This past week, one man spoke of his struggles with a \$41,000 medical bill. Others mentioned missed paychecks.

That they've all had such problems getting aid irritated fellow survivor Kimberly J. Brown enough that she fired off an e-mail to Minnesota's state and U.S. senators.

"I want these innocent people to have all of their medical, all of their insurance, all of their mortgages, all of their lost wages, all of their mental health counseling taken care of by the entities that were in charge, or partially in charge, of that bridge," the 36-year-old technical writer fumed in the message. "And not just today, but months and years from now."

Several state lawmakers have said they'd consider putting taxpayer money in a fund for collapse victims. But the question has been complicated by the possibility that victims will sue the state, which inspected and maintained the bridge.

The state caps its liability from any one event at \$1 million, which would be divided among all the victims.

"It would just be pitifully inadequate," said Phil Sieff, one of a group of attorneys working for free to represent bridge collapse victims.

"The nonprofits are doing what they can, but it's not adequate. The government and the people responsible for the bridge need to step forward," he said.

The Interstate 35W bridge collapse cut off one of the main roads out of downtown Minneapolis, snarling traffic and putting pressure on the state to replace it quickly.

The winning bid for the new 10-lane bridge design, announced Monday, came in at \$234 million, some \$57 million more than the cheapest bid. And the state is promising \$27 million in bonuses if the contractor finishes early, which would put the overall cost of responding to the disaster and rebuilding at more than \$400 million.

That particularly annoyed Brown.

"It's time to slow down and back up. Your new bridge is going up too fast. You still have a huge mess from the old one. Fix this," she wrote.

People have donated about \$940,000 to the "Minnesota Helps — Bridge Disaster Fund." But only \$214,000 of that has been distributed to other charities who have been helping bridge collapse victims, said Chris Langer, a spokeswoman for the Minneapolis Foundation, one of the charities coordinating the fund. None of the money is going directly to individual victims, although victims can submit the bills they accrue, she said.

Langer said more money will be distributed more rapidly as victims fill out applications for help. And she said none of the money will cover administrative costs.

"Our intention is to distribute over time 100 percent of the money that has been collected," she said.

State Sen. Ron Latz is co-chairman of a legislative panel that will consider whether to raise

the \$1 million cap. He said he expects hearings on the issue within a month or two.

Latz said he has not decided whether to push to raise the cap in this case, but he pointed out that most victims' financial losses should be covered by insurance.

"It's a terrible tragedy and it's really unfortunate that people have financial stress in response to it. But that doesn't mean automatically that the state has an obligation to write out a check," he said.

Lindsay Petterson, 24, was on her way home to Minneapolis from a day of working in a suburban group home when the bridge collapsed. Her car fell into the Mississippi River and filled with water immediately. Her windows were closed, and she's still not exactly sure how she found her way out. She broke a vertebrae. The car, which she still owed \$4,000 on, was a total loss. She hasn't been back to work in the 10 weeks since the collapse.

Petterson said she's fine, financially. Co-workers chipped in enough vacation time to keep her paychecks going. A fundraiser by her friends and family in her hometown of Lake Lillian raised \$12,000, which she has saved for when she replaces her car.

Insurance also covered many of her losses, but she said she's worried for others in her survivor's group.

"We're just really anxious about what the future holds, and where people will end up," she said. "I don't feel like the government has done much of anything to step forward and say that you'll be taken care of, regardless of who's at fault. We didn't ask for it, but it happened, and our lives have been turned upside down and we have to sit here and pick up the pieces on our own."