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House of Representatives

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**Remarks of Rep. Chris Smith (R-NJ) during debate
on H.R. 8987, *the Fairness for 9/11 Families Act***

Mr. Speaker Everyone remembers where they were and what they were doing—I was in Washington here chairing a Veteran’s Affairs Committee hearing—when a group of radical jihadists hijacked 4 airliners to perpetrate the worst act of terrorism in American history.

Today—21 years later—we remember the horror and pain suffered by those who were murdered, and the anguish felt by their families and friends both then and now.

On the morning of 9/11, I got a mere glimpse into the sense of horror suffered by the victim’s families when I couldn’t reach my own brother, Tom—an American Airlines 757 Captain who often piloted Flight 11 from Logan to LA, the flight that crashed into the North Tower.

After several hours, I finally made contact – he was okay, but he was friends with the crew of Flight 11, all who were killed on that day.

I ask my colleagues to strongly support H.R. 8987, *The Fairness for 9/11 Families Act*.

This legislation addresses significant shortcomings in programs made available to the widows and children of 9/11.

As I think members know, in 2015, Congress created the United States Victims of State Sponsored Terrorism Fund (USVSST) to provide compensation to Americans injured in acts of international state-sponsored terrorism.

Despite the obvious connection to the 9/11 surviving family members, however, a misinterpretation of the law by the fund’s Special Master unjustly barred spouses and children of 9/11 victims from participating in the fund.

In 2021, at the behest of Congress, the Government Accountability Office (GAO) conducted an investigation and found 5,364 victims, spouses, and dependents were excluded from fair restitution due to a technicality in the administration of the United States Victims of State-Sponsored Terrorism Fund.

H.R. 8987 provides immediate relief with a lump sum catch-up payment to the victim's immediate family members.

For two decades, Mr. Speaker, I have worked with the "Jersey Girls" to achieve justice. Wonderful, wonderful widows, who have tried to achieve justice for those who committed these horrific crimes and those who suffered and were left behind.

Because of them, we got the 9/11 commission, and I was the Chief Republican sponsor of the bill, but that was not because of what we did here as much as it was because of the work that they did in walking the halls and trying to get people to support a 9/11 fund.

I point out to my colleagues that Tom Kean, our former Governor, headed up that, along with Lee Hamilton, the distinguished former Chairman of the Foreign Affairs Committee, and what they produced after their hearings became the blueprint to protect America.

As they noted in their opening statement—and I chaired two hearings about implementing the report—what they said is we are safer, but not safe. They prescribed both administrative and legislative actions that should be undertaken to protect America.

I would note Kathy Wisniewski, who works on my staff and lost her husband, Alan, is with us today; Kristen Breitweiser; Mindy Klinberg; Lorie Van Auken; Kathy Maher and her sons Joseph and Daniel; and the next generation of 9/11 Family advocates including Angela Mistruli and Brett Eagleson who lost parents on 9/11, were the driving force in achieving this win today, which again, is modicum of justice for their egregious loss.

I want to thank Nicole Maliotakis, our Congress friend and colleague from Staten Island for her work on this and her bill, as well as the Chairman's bill, which has a pay-for.

I think this is an important piece of legislation. I hope every member of the body will support it.