

East Palestine, Ohio resident: 84 cancer diagnoses among residents since 2023 Norfolk Southern derailment

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More than three and a half years after the Norfolk Southern train derailment and toxic chemical disaster in East Palestine, Ohio, residents are dealing with significant health consequences, including a rising number of cancer patients.

“Our list is now up to 84 people,” Jami Wallace, an East Palestine resident and community activist, told the *World Socialist Web Site*. “Fifteen of those are brain cancer, and the list is growing every day.”

Jami began keeping the list because, she said, “no one was tracking it.”

The train that derailed on February 3, 2023 included 11 cars carrying hazardous materials. One of the derailed cars carried polyvinyl chloride (PVC) pellets, which caught fire and released toxic smoke and combustion products into the air.

Three days later, railroad and government officials carried out a so-called “vent and burn” of five tank cars carrying a total of 115,580 gallons of vinyl chloride—a move which later was found to be unnecessary. Contractors used explosives to puncture the cars and set the vinyl chloride on fire. Burning vinyl chloride can produce hydrogen chloride and phosgene, a highly toxic gas, among other combustion products. Vinyl chloride itself is a known human carcinogen.

The operation produced a towering column of black smoke, spreading toxic combustion products over East Palestine and the surrounding countryside. Hazardous chemicals released in the derailment also contaminated the ground and nearby waterways.

Jami has been speaking out over the health consequences of the derailment since the disaster. She helped organize residents in East Palestine, has pressed government agencies for answers, worked with independent researchers and sought to bring together communities affected by chemical disasters elsewhere in the United States. One of her central concerns is preventing another community from going through what residents of East Palestine have experienced.

Jami began compiling the cancer list less than six months ago from people she knows personally, residents or families who contacted her and cases she encountered through community and social-media networks. The list is necessarily incomplete.

But for Jami, the names are not statistics.

“It felt morbid connecting obituaries to the residents on the list that have passed away from the cancers,” she said. But she felt it was necessary “to ask the questions, to get the data.”

“These are East Palestine residents,” she continued. “We actually have names. We have families.”

One of those families is that of Connie Bennett, who died June 17 at

the age of 56, four months after being diagnosed with stage 4 lymphoma.

Connie lived about 2,500 feet from the derailment site and the fires that followed.

Her sister, Lonnie Miller, described Connie as “a loving daughter, sister, sister-in-law, aunt, and devoted wife.” She was also a devoted pet owner who rescued basset hounds.

“She had the right to know what was taking place in her front yard,” Lonnie said. “We all had the right to know. We were withheld important information.”

Lonnie said families returned to homes they had worked their entire lives for because officials repeatedly told residents the area was safe.

“We had the right to know what we were bringing them home to,” she said.

“And Governor DeWine and the State of Ohio and all of our elected officials failed us repeatedly. They failed us repeatedly.”

Lonnie told the *World Socialist Web Site* that she took Connie to each of her chemotherapy treatments.

“She fought every single day to stay with us,” Lonnie said. “I took her to every one of her chemo treatments and then I had to bring her back to her home which was 2,500 feet away. And they never told us it was dangerous. They always said it was safe.”

“I held my sister’s hand as she was dying and I made a promise,” she said. “I held her hand in the hospital and I promised to fully hold them accountable for what they did. And I intend to keep that promise.”

Behind Jami’s count are people undergoing surgery and cancer treatment, families mourning deaths and residents confronting medical bills and decisions they never expected to face.

Jami described two other families who have been struck by cancer. Dana Kyker lost her husband to cancer after the derailment and was subsequently diagnosed with breast cancer herself. According to Jami, Dana is now preparing to leave the home she and her husband built together and return to Washington state, where she has family support.

“She really struggled with the decision to sell their forever home,” Jami said. The couple had been married for more than 30 years and built the house intending to spend the rest of their lives there.

Another family lives just across the state line in Pennsylvania, where the husband was diagnosed with a rare form of male breast cancer and underwent a double mastectomy.

A preventable disaster

Everything about the disaster was preventable. The National Transportation Safety Board found that a wheel bearing had been overheating for miles before the Norfolk Southern train reached East Palestine on that evening in February 2023, when 38 cars derailed near the Ohio-Pennsylvania border.

Trackside detectors recorded sharply rising temperatures, and surveillance video showed fire near the bearing at Salem, about 19 miles away. However, the train crew did not receive a critical warning until the train reached East Palestine, when it was already too late to prevent the derailment.

Late last month, whistleblower records obtained through Freedom of Information Act requests by the Government Accountability Project revealed that federal agencies possessed information about potential chemical dangers that they did not provide to residents even as officials repeatedly reassured the population that the community was safe.

Residents began reporting headaches, respiratory problems, burning eyes and skin, nausea, dizziness and other symptoms almost immediately. In the months and years that followed, residents repeatedly reported persistent and increasingly serious health problems to government agencies, at public meetings and to the media.

The National Transportation Safety Board later concluded that the February 6 vent-and-burn was unnecessary.

“Cancer isn’t the only illness that we’re seeing in the community”

“Cancer isn’t the only illness that we’re seeing in the community,” Jami said. “We’re seeing a lot of thyroid issues, a lot of liver issues, neurological issues, gastrointestinal issues.”

She also described continuing respiratory problems and memory difficulties.

Jami herself has experienced a series of health problems since the derailment.

“I myself have been diagnosed with hypothyroidism,” she said. “I have been diagnosed with a chronic adult cough.”

She said memory problems led doctors to perform a SPECT brain scan and that she has also developed an ovarian cyst requiring further treatment.

Jami said her greatest concern is for her daughter.

“Our kids—those are our children—is what I’m most worried about,” she said. “My 6-year-old deserves to live. She deserves to be able to afford life, no matter what challenges come at her as far as her health issues.”

For Jami and other residents already struggling with illness, medical care cannot wait until researchers someday determine precisely which disease was caused by which exposure.

“I also feel like we desperately need health insurance,” she said. “I have health insurance and just the co-pays and the co-insurance, I’m getting all these bills in the mail that I can’t afford to pay.”

Limited government study of the health impact

In the weeks after the derailment, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and its Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry surveyed residents and first responders. Hundreds reported headaches, coughing, eye and throat irritation, nausea and other symptoms. Seven of 15 CDC/ATSDR investigators working in East Palestine themselves became ill with similar symptoms.

Ohio and Pennsylvania health authorities conducted a follow-up survey in the spring of 2024, asking residents about continuing symptoms, medical care and unmet health needs.

But it was not until June 2025, more than two years after the disaster, that the National Institutes of Health announced a five-year, \$10 million initiative to investigate the long-term health consequences. An NIH research office did not open in East Palestine until February 2026.

Meanwhile, Jami says residents continue to get sick and need healthcare. While some residents are reluctant to participate in still another study, she believes the community should be studied if what researchers learn can prevent the same thing from happening elsewhere.

“I don’t want them to turn the next community into lab rats,” she said.

More than three and a half years after the disaster, the comprehensive, long-term health surveillance needed to determine what has happened to the exposed population remains unfinished.

Jami’s cancer tally is not a substitute for scientific health surveillance, but evidence of why that work is urgently needed. Residents should not be left to compile lists of the sick and the dead while government agencies take years to establish the long-term health consequences of one of the most serious chemical disasters in recent US history.

East Palestine and the surrounding communities must be provided comprehensive healthcare for the rest of their lives, without cost to residents. At the same time, a fully funded, long-term health study must be carried out by scientists independent of Norfolk Southern and the government agencies whose own conduct is at issue, with residents, railroad workers and independent researchers given full access to the evidence.

Jami said one of her greatest concerns is that what happened in East Palestine will be repeated elsewhere.

“I fight for justice and accountability,” she said. “It’s just not about the money. It’s also about making sure this doesn’t happen to another mother and another community.”

“I feel like our lives have just become a cost of doing business,” she said.



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