

Gallegly meets with Metrolink victims in Simi Valley

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Richard Myles received minor injuries in the 2005 Glendale Metrolink crash. The Moorpark man's neck was broken when Metrolink train 111 slammed into a Union Pacific freight train in Chatsworth on Sept. 12, 2008.

Photocopies of X-rays show metal rods and pins on both sides of Myles' spinal column. He will need future surgeries.

Kumar Shankar, 66, of Simi Valley, will undergo surgery Thursday to fix the bridge of his nose, which was reattached after the crash. Eleven of his ribs were broken, his wrist shattered and metal has been inserted in his clavicle and scapula. Sitting in his backyard and hearing trains and their whistles is too much for Shanker.

Mackenzie Souser of Camarillo was three-days shy of her 13th birthday when her father, Doyle Souser, 56, was killed in the crash, which claimed the lives of 23 other passengers and the engineer and injured 135.

"He was really my best friend," Mackenzie said Tuesday. "I hope someday that I could marry somebody exactly like him. He was my favorite person in the whole world."

Mackenzie, Shanker and Myles were among 25 families of those injured or killed in Metrolink's worst train collision who met Tuesday afternoon with Congressman Elton Gallegly, R-Simi Valley, for a private town hall meeting in the gymnasium of the Boys & Girls Club in Simi Valley.

Gallegly has emerged as a high-profile advocate for those injured and the families of those killed in the crash in Chatsworth two years ago. Gallegly's meeting came nearly a week after Metrolink and its former train operator, Connex, filed papers in federal court to establish a \$200 million liability fund to compensate those injured in the crash and the families of those who were killed. The court would be responsible for dividing the money among the parties.

The congressman is investigating whether legislation could be used to lift the cap on compensation for the victims.

Investigators determined the crash was caused by the Metrolink engineer who failed to stop the train at a red signal because he was sending text messages, which is prohibited.

Metrolink officials said last week the move would allow them to pay the maximum level of compensation allowed to injured passengers and the deceased. Doing so would likely mean the victims would be paid years faster as well.

The maximum liability amount is set by the federal Amtrak Reform and Accountability Act of 1997. Critics, however, contend the amount is not enough to cover the past, ongoing and future medical care of those injured and the loss of life. Some people, including the Souser family, lost not only a loved one, but the family's main breadwinner. One attorney has estimated there to be, at least \$600 million in claims.

Gallegly's spokesman, Tom Pfeiffer, said the first step is to determine if the issue can be dealt with by legislation. If it can be, it would be targeted compensation specific to 2008 Chatsworth crash.

The congressman said Tuesday that Sen. Dianne Feinstein, D-San Francisco, had a representative at the meeting and he has received support from the head of the House of Representatives Transportation Committee.

"It will take a very strong bipartisan effort to get this issue resolved," Gallegly said after the meeting. "This was an emotional day. There were a lot of incredible people in this room."

While the meeting was closed to the press, a number of those in attendance talked to members of the media afterward, describing the testimony as hard to hear and yet healing.

"It was good, it was healing to begin to hear some of the stories," said Jenny Fuller, of Simi Valley, whose husband, Walt Fuller, was killed in the crash. "I hope that we see legislation that's needed to get rid of the liability cap."

Dale Hoagland of Simi Valley suffered a number of injuries in the crash both physical and psychological. The collision left him with survivor's guilt, and he could not speak about what he experienced. He thought the meeting went "pretty well."

"Everybody got to let out all of their feelings," Hoagland said. "I don't think a tragedy of this magnitude can be capped."

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