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## COVID-19 UPDATES

# NY teacher dies from COVID-19 after 'work from home' request denied



Family blames NY school district for special education teacher's death from COVID-19

By **WABC Staff** | February 17, 2021 at 12:42 AM EST - Updated February 17 at 12:42 AM

NEW ROCHELLE, N.Y. (WABC) - The family of a beloved New York teacher is blaming the local school district for her death from COVID-19 after her remote work request was denied.

Karen Johnson, 57, died Feb. 11 after a battle with COVID-19. She worked as a special education teacher for more than two decades at Albert Leonard Middle School in New Rochelle, New York.



Karen Johnson, 57, died Feb. 11 after a battle with COVID-19. She worked as a special education teacher for more than two decades at Albert Leonard Middle School in New Rochelle, New York. (Source: Johnson Family, WABC via CNN)

“We lost a great woman. I love my wife very much. She was very caring,” said her husband, Robert Johnson Sr.

Mixed with their mourning, Karen Johnson’s husband and her son, Robert Johnson Jr., are left with frustration and anger.

The family feared what could happen if she continued with in-person learning at the middle school, knowing COVID-19 could have fatal consequences for her because she had medical

preconditions that included asthma and obesity.

“We’ve lost something that can’t be replaced, and it’s something that we believe could have been wholly prevented had the school district taken our grievances seriously,” Robert Johnson Jr. said.

Karen Johnson wrote last August to the city school district detailing her concerns. She included a note from her doctor that read in part, “Every reasonable accommodation should be made to allow this patient to work from home.”

The acting superintendent responded two months later, writing, “The district is denying your request for an accommodation to work remotely. The district would be unable to ensure equity of instruction for all students across all classes, grade levels and buildings.”

The family can’t prove Karen Johnson contracted COVID-19 during her work at the middle school, but they say she was extra diligent about practicing safety protocols wherever she went.

“We believe that her working remotely and staying home would have prolonged her life. Them forcing her back to work, that was a risky situation,” Robert Johnson Jr. said. “This was the one time we asked for anything from the school district or from anyone in the city, and I feel like they turned their back on us.”

In a statement, the district extended its condolences to the Johnson family, but it would not comment on Karen Johnson’s case specifically. A spokesman did say administrators are aware of the concerns regarding the circumstances of her death.

A family-only virtual funeral service is scheduled for Friday.