

SCHOOL MAIL HANDLING PROCEDURES

Past training in security planning for suspected letter and parcel bombs reminded us that since all government agencies receive mail, a letter and parcel bomb security plan is an essential component of this process. For that reason, screening procedures for postal items should be in place. School mail handling personnel will be given disposable gloves and smocks, and possibly an N95 HEPA filtering facepiece.

Incoming mail in any organization follows much the same pattern.

Bundles or bags of mail, as well as parcels, are delivered to a centralized mail center for distribution. The Initial Mail Screening Center should not be located in the main office of the school, since any suspicious letters or parcels found will disrupt the office and effect the entire building.

The actual initial sorting of the mail for delivery to units, divisions, or individuals must be done by hand, with each item being picked up, its address read, and the mail item placed into its proper distribution box for delivery.

This is the point where screening of incoming mail for suspect items should occur and those individuals who normally handle this mail sorting should perform the screening action.

This is critical because those individuals are most likely to notice postal items that are contrary to normal mail.

What constitutes a suspicious letter or parcel?

Some typical characteristics which ought to trigger suspicion include letters or parcels that:

- Excessive postage, no postage, or non-canceled postage
- No return address or fictitious return address
- Improper spelling of addressee names, titles, or locations
- Unexpected envelopes from foreign countries
- Suspicious or threatening messages written on packages
- Postmark showing different location than return address
- Distorted handwriting or cut and paste lettering
- Unprofessionally wrapped packages or excessive use of tape, strings, etc.
- Packages marked as "Fragile - Handle with Care", "Rush - Do Not Delay", "Personal" or confidential"
- Rigid, uneven, irregular, or lopsided packages
- Packages that are discolored, oily, or have an unusual odor or ticking sound
- Packages with soft spots, bulges, or excessive weight
- Protruding wires or aluminum foil
- Visual distractions

*Even if the threat is a hoax, it can disrupt the operations of any School or agency.

A delivery system for a Biological Threat Agents consist of just about anything that can produce an aerosol, including a wide variety of commercially available objects.

The most likely form for dissemination of anthrax as a biological terrorist agent is aerosolization of spores in letters.

What Should You Do If You Receive an Anthrax Threat?

These threats require prompt action by health, law enforcement and laboratory personnel. Coordination and communication across agencies are necessary to protect the public and first responders from agents such as anthrax.

If you opened a letter that claims to have contaminated you with anthrax and there is no substance in the letter or envelope, no one including the person opening the letter, is at risk. Wash your hands with soap and water. No decontamination or treatment is necessary. Notify your supervisor and they will notify the appropriate officials.

If you opened a letter that claims to have contaminated you with anthrax and there is a substance in the letter or envelope the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) in Atlanta and Orange County Commissioner of Health recommends the following steps:

Do not shake or empty the contents of any suspicious envelope or package; Double bag the letter or package in zipper-type or zip-lock type plastic bags using latex gloves, or some other type of container to prevent leakage of contents; If you do not have any container, then COVER the envelope or package with anything (e.g., clothing, paper, trash can, etc.). DO NOT REMOVE THIS COVER; Then LEAVE the room and CLOSE the door, or section off the area to prevent others from entering (i.e., keep others away); Notify your immediate supervisor who will notify BOCES Health & Safety, who will arrange to collect the letter/package and assess the threat situation after consulting with local police; WASH your hands with soap and water to prevent spreading any powder to your face; Ensure that all persons who have touched the letter wash their hands with soap and water; LIST all people who were in the room or area when this suspicious letter or package was recognized. Give this list to the BOCES Health & Safety who may forward this to local law enforcement officials for follow-up investigations; Place the disposable smock worn at the time in plastic bags; If possible change clothing in the workplace and DO NOT let anyone else touch the clothing; Shower with soap and water.

How Is Anthrax Made Into a Weapon?

Biological agents can be prepared and used either in liquid or dry form. Procedures and equipment for preparing liquid biological agents are simple, but the resulting product is difficult to disseminate into small-particle effective aerosols. Conversely, procedures for producing dried biological agents, such as anthrax spores are complex and require more sophisticated equipment, yet this product is readily disseminated by any number of devices.

If an organization has the capability to produce viruses by means of tissue culture technology, then it could process a liquid agent into a dry powder. The dried agent might have the consistency of bath powder. An ideal dry agent should have free-flowing properties. If the powder were derived from a highly sophisticated process, however, it would contain very small particles and be highly charged with static electricity. A less sophisticated process yields a coarse-appearing powder comprised of large particles (10-20 microns) and is not particularly difficult to handle.

Unlike nuclear and chemical agents, biological agents are not detectable with the five human senses. You would never realize you may have been exposed to a biological agent until you started becoming sick with certain symptoms.

Post-Decontamination Considerations:

BOCES Health & Safety should interview all potential victims and document their names, addresses, and phone numbers; Decisions to provide treatments for Biological Threat Agents should be made by public health authorities; Consider mental health counseling for potentially exposed persons; It is important that sample results be relayed to exposed persons once available to either initiate additional medical procedures if tests are positive or to eliminate fears and anxiety if tests are negative; If explosive devices are ruled out and the evaluation for potential chemical, biological, or radioactive source material is negative, then response continues as a law enforcement investigation.