



Highlights of [GAO-04-239](#), a report to congressional requesters

Why GAO Did This Study

In September and October 2001, at least four letters containing anthrax spores were mailed to news media personnel and two U.S. Senators, leading to the first cases of bioterrorism-related anthrax in the United States. The contaminated letters, which were delivered through the U.S. mail system, caused 22 cases of anthrax, 5 of them fatal. Nine postal employees associated with two postal facilities that processed the letters—Trenton in New Jersey and Brentwood in Washington, D.C.—contracted anthrax and two Brentwood employees died.

The U.S. Postal Service closed Trenton and Brentwood, but other contaminated postal facilities remained open. GAO's review covers Trenton, Brentwood, and three of these other facilities. As requested, this report describes (1) the factors considered in deciding whether to close the five facilities, (2) the information communicated to postal employees about health risk and the extent of the facilities' contamination, and (3) how lessons learned from the response to the contamination could be used in future situations.

What GAO Recommends

GAO is making recommendations to help ensure that the Postal Service has comprehensive, clear, accurate, and up-to-date guidance for any future anthrax response. The Postal Service indicated that it had taken or would take action on GAO's recommendations.

www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-04-239.

To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on the link above. For more information, contact Mark L. Goldstein at (202) 512-2834 or goldsteinm@gao.gov.

U.S. POSTAL SERVICE

Better Guidance Is Needed to Ensure an Appropriate Response to Anthrax Contamination

What GAO Found

According to Postal Service managers, public health officials, and union representatives, the Postal Service considered the health risks to its employees ahead of its mission to deliver the mail in deciding whether to close postal facilities. The Postal Service relied on public health agencies to assess the health risks to its employees. These agencies believed the risks to be minimal until the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) confirmed cases of anthrax in postal employees at Trenton and Brentwood. The Postal Service then closed these facilities. Public health agencies underestimated the health risks to postal employees, in part, because they did not know that anthrax spores could leak from taped, unopened letters in sufficient quantities to cause a fatal form of anthrax. The Postal Service kept the three other facilities covered by GAO's review open because public health officials had advised the agency that employees at those centers were at minimal risk. CDC and the Postal Service have said they would have made different decisions if they had earlier understood the health risks to postal employees.

The Postal Service communicated information to affected postal employees about the health risks posed by, and the extent of, anthrax contamination at the five facilities in GAO's review, but problems with accuracy, clarity, and timeliness led employees to question the information they received. Problems with accuracy stemmed from incomplete information about health risks, and problems with clarity occurred as information on the medical response to anthrax contamination changed with experience. Problems with timeliness occurred when the Postal Service delayed the release of quantitative data (anthrax spore counts) for one facility, in part because it was uncertain what the results meant for worker safety and public health. To communicate more effectively, the Postal Service has established a center to coordinate information within the postal system and has worked with other agencies to develop guidelines for responding to anthrax.

The response to anthrax contamination revealed several lessons, the most important of which is that agencies need to choose a course of action that poses the least risk of harm when considering actions to protect people from uncertain and potentially life-threatening health risks. Because public health officials underestimated the health risks involved, actions to protect postal employees were delayed. In addition, agencies' guidance did not cover all of the circumstances that occurred. The Postal Service has since revised its guidance, but the revised guidance (1) does not define some key terms, including those that would trigger a decision to evacuate a facility, (2) includes some outdated references that could cause confusion during a future response, and (3) does not address certain issues, such as what steps would be taken during the interval between a diagnosis of anthrax in a postal employee and confirmation of the disease. In addition, the guidance does not reflect proactive measures, including facility closures, that the Postal Service has recently implemented in response to suspected contamination.