

JOHN E. POTTER
POSTMASTER GENERAL, CEO



December 17, 2002

The Honorable Joseph I. Lieberman
Chairman
Committee on Governmental Affairs
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510-6250

Dear Mr. Chairman:

This responds to your December 2 letter, regarding the handling of a suspicious letter in the Hartford Processing and Distribution Center on November 19. Following are the answers to the questions you raised:

What are the USPS protocols for handling suspicious mail?

The U.S. Postal Service has established specific protocols, which have been coordinated with appropriate federal agencies. I have enclosed the Postal Service's "Guidance for Postal Service Hazmat First Responders" and other documents summarizing the required procedures.

Are postal supervisors and employees trained in these protocols?

Managers, supervisors, and employees have received awareness training on the procedures, as well as formal training in emergency action plans, hazardous materials first responder procedures, emergency management, crisis management, and continuity of operations plans. The Postal Service continues to emphasize the importance of following the required response procedures. The most recent national directive was issued on November 22, stating:

"We continue to experience incidents involving suspected or alleged biohazardous substances in the mail. While to date none of these incidents has involved a real hazardous substance, we must remain diligent. Managers and supervisors must follow established procedures when employees report a suspicious mail piece or release of unknown substances from mail pieces. These procedures and related guidance continue to be posted on the Safety Toolkit Resource Page accessible from the main USPS intranet site. Every incident should be treated as suspect until determined otherwise.

"As part of emergency planning, executives/managers should be periodically reviewing all plans with staff, conducting training and employee awareness activities, reviewing communication plans, and promptly reporting incidents. Internal and external communications are a vital part of the response process. Employees and their

representatives must be kept informed at all stages, including the final results and resolution of the incident. Continue to report these incidents through established channels. When an incident results in employee injury, significant disruption to operations, or media attention, HQ safety should be notified as soon as possible.”

- **Were these protocols followed on November 19 in the Hartford mail processing facility, and if not, why not?**

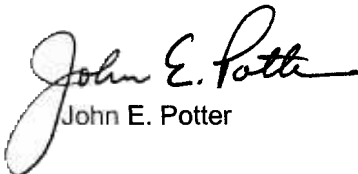
No. The supervisor initially involved failed to follow protocol established for a suspicious powder incident. He placed the letter in a tray and brought it to the Postal Police Office. He did not consider this was a suspicious powder piece, but rather a written threat letter. That is why he moved the envelope to the Postal Police Office.

if these protocols were not followed, what action has the USPS taken regarding this breach? What steps will the USPS take in the future to ensure that such events are properly handled?

First, the supervisor has been disciplined for his failure to follow established protocol for a suspicious powder mail piece incident. Second, as you reference in your letter, the Postal Service conducted an after-action review on November 20, which included representatives of the employee unions, to ensure that supervisors and employees are completely familiar with the protocols. We will continue to emphasize to all postal employees the importance of following established protocols. Third, the Postal Inspection Service is assisting the Federal Bureau of Investigation in its lead role, reviewing the incident and working to identify the person(s) who mailed the letter that initiated the crisis. Once that has been determined, we will seek full prosecution of anyone involved.

I recognize the seriousness of this occurrence, and I am grateful no employees were actually placed at risk. Safety of postal employees will always be our foremost concern, and we have moved quickly to ensure future adherence to proper procedures. Please let me know if I can assist you with other postal issues.

Sincerely,


John E. Potter

Guidance for Postal Service Hazmat First Responders

The current problem with anthrax hoaxes and actual terrorist activities has created a difficult situation for first responders to incidental spills and leaks of hazardous materials.

First Responders in the postal system are only trained and authorized to deal with minor spills and leaks of hazardous materials, usually consumer commodity-type substances. They are not expected to clean up or take other actions when confronted with emergency spill or release of a dangerous biological substance.

A known or suspected release of anthrax spores is an emergency. Clear guidelines for what to do have already been issued and reiterated many times. This guidance is being posted on the Safety Toolkit Resources web page.

Clearly, most spills and leaks in the mail will continue to be of the incidental variety and will not involve emergency releases of hazardous materials, or anthrax spores.

Therefore, First Responders can follow established procedures, based on their training, when an incidental release is certain. The following guidelines should be used to determine if a release is incidental or a non-anthrax-related emergency:

POWDERS AND SIMILAR MATERIALS:

- If the initial report involves the release of a powder-like substance *from a mail piece* isolate the area immediately shut down the ventilation system. Also shut down any processing equipment or machinery that may have processed or damaged the mailpiece. The goal is to avoid spreading the contamination in the air.
- Remove employees from the immediate area. Ask the person who discovered the release if there was any label or marking that would identify the spilled material. Commercially packaged products such as soup mixes or soap powder obviously wouldn't be hazardous.
- If possible identify the mailer or addressee and determine what was mailed. This should be done without disturbing the parcel or immediate surroundings (use binoculars for example). If it can be confirmed that the mailing was innocent, proceed with normal cleanup procedures. **If the nature of the spilled powder cannot be confirmed within a short time, initiate emergency procedures.**
- Discovery of loose powders and similar materials not directly associated with mail – in a swing room, locker room or aisles, for example – are unlikely to be hazardous. Everything from donut powdered sugar to spilled makeup has caused unnecessary alarm, disruption to operations and wasted emergency resources.
- Unless there is compelling evidence to the contrary, these materials should be cleaned up with standard procedures. As a precaution, the materials can be soaked in a 1-10-bleach solution for 10 minutes, which would kill any organisms.

LIQUIDS:

- There is no evidence of any mailing with intent to cause harm that involves biological or chemical hazards in liquid form. If a package is leaking a liquid, follow normal procedures for determining if the release is incidental and can be cleaned up by postal First Responders, or is an emergency requiring outside response.

SMOKE, FUMES, and VAPORS:

- Any package releasing visible smoke, fumes or irritating vapors or gases is considered an emergency under postal hazmat policy. The immediate area should be evacuated and outside help called.