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Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-04-205T](#), a testimony before the Committee on Government Reform, House of Representatives

Why GAO Did This Study

On October 21, 2001, the U.S. Postal Service closed its Brentwood mail processing facility after the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) confirmed that an employee there had contracted inhalation anthrax, an often-fatal form of the disease. On October 21 and 22, two other Brentwood employees died of inhalation anthrax. The contamination was linked to a letter that passed through the facility on or about October 12, before being opened in the office of Senator Daschle (see fig.) in the Hart Senate Office Building on October 15. The Hart Building was closed the next day. The Brentwood facility has since been decontaminated and will soon reopen. This testimony, which is based on ongoing work, provides GAO's preliminary observations on the decisions made in closing the facility and problems experienced in communicating with employees, as well as lessons learned from the experience.

What GAO Recommends

Because the Postal Service agreed to inform Brentwood employees before the facility is reopened that it could not guarantee that the facility is completely risk free, GAO is making no recommendations at this time.

www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-04-205T.

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

U.S. POSTAL SERVICE

Clear Communication with Employees Needed before Reopening the Brentwood Facility

What GAO Found

The Postal Service's decision to wait to close the Brentwood facility and refer employees for medical treatment until CDC confirmed that a postal employee had contracted inhalation anthrax was consistent with the advice the Postal Service received from public health advisers and the information about health risk available at the time. However, because circumstances differed at Brentwood and the Hart Building—an observed spill at the Hart Building and no observable incident at Brentwood—the Postal Service's response differed from the response at Capitol Hill, leading some Brentwood employees to question whether the Postal Service was taking adequate steps to protect their health.

The Postal Service communicated information to its Brentwood employees during the anthrax incident, but some of the health risk information changed over time, exacerbating employees' concerns about the measures being taken to protect them. Notably, employees later learned that their risk of contracting the disease was greater than originally stated. Other factors, including difficulties in communicating the uncertainty associated with health recommendations and employees' distrust of postal managers, also challenged efforts to communicate effectively. Recently, the Postal Service informed employees that Brentwood, which has been tested and certified as safe for occupancy, is "100 percent free of anthrax contamination." However, in discussions with GAO, the Service agreed to revise future communications to acknowledge that although any remaining risk at the facility is likely to be low, complete freedom from risk cannot be guaranteed.

The Postal Service and others have learned since the 2001 anthrax incidents that (1) the risk of contracting anthrax through the mail is greater than was previously believed and more caution is needed to respond to that greater risk and (2) clear, accurate communication is critical to managing the response to an incident and its aftermath. The Postal Service is revising its guidance to respond more quickly and to communicate more effectively to employees and the public in the event of a future incident.

Anthrax-Contaminated Letter Opened in Hart Building on October 15, 2001



Source: FBI website.