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Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-05-716](#), a report to the Ranking Minority Member, Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs, U.S. Senate

Why GAO Did This Study

In October 2003, an envelope marked “Caution: Ricin Poison” was discovered at an airmail facility in Greenville, South Carolina. Ricin is a poison that, in certain forms, can cause death. The U.S. Postal Service has emphasized to its employees to be on the alert for “suspicious mail” that may pose a threat and has developed guidance for them on how to identify and respond to such mail, in order to protect them from harm. Postal inspectors and emergency responders help in the responses to suspicious mail by performing an initial assessment of the threat it poses.

This report describes (1) actions taken by various agencies, in responding to the incident, to protect the health of postal employees and the public; (2) Postal Service guidance related to suspicious mail in place in October 2003 and the extent to which it was followed during the incident; and (3) subsequent changes made in this guidance and the extent to which current guidance addresses issues raised by the incident.

What GAO Recommends

GAO is making recommendations to further improve the Postal Service’s guidance related to suspicious mail, to help ensure that postal personnel are prepared to respond to future incidents. The Postal Service indicated that it generally agreed with these recommendations and will take action on them.

www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-05-716.

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

U.S. POSTAL SERVICE

Guidance on Suspicious Mail Needs Further Refinement

What GAO Found

Postal Service personnel identified the envelope in question as suspect and took some initial actions in response, such as moving it to a room away from employees. However, personnel did not speak with postal inspectors or emergency responders about the envelope until 12 hours after its discovery. Subsequently, a multiagency response took place. Key efforts included testing of the envelope and its contents, monitoring the health of employees and the public, sampling the facility for contamination, and communicating information to employees and unions.

At the time of the 2003 incident, the Postal Service had in place several guidelines on identifying and responding to suspicious mail—which emphasized steps to take, such as not moving an identified envelope or package, to protect employees. However, during the response, postal personnel did not fully follow this guidance, and a lack of consistency and clarity in the guidance may have been a contributing factor. For example, the instructions in the suspicious mail guidelines were not consistent, and it was not clear whether one guideline applied to nonanthrax scenarios. In addition, the Postal Service had some guidance on communicating with employees and unions regarding suspicious mail incidents, and its efforts to inform them about this incident generally followed this guidance. However, a lack of specific instructions on who should provide and receive information and when may have contributed to some communications issues that arose.

Since the incident, the Postal Service has made a number of changes in its guidance that have improved its consistency and clarity. For example, it issued new, simpler uniform guidelines on identifying and responding to suspicious mail and has emphasized these guidelines in monthly talks to employees. However, current guidance does not fully address issues raised by the incident because some key elements are lacking. For example, training for managers does not present all the guidance they may need to decide whether a piece of mail is indeed suspicious and response actions are warranted. Also, the Postal Service has not provided managers with explicit guidance on communicating with employees and unions regarding suspicious mail incidents. Such guidance is important to ensure that employees and unions are kept informed, particularly when a mail piece is suspected of posing a biological or chemical threat and is sent for testing.

Message on envelope and vial found inside

caution RICIN POISON
Enclosed in sealed container
Do not open without proper protection



Sources: GAO (left graphic) and FBI (right photograph).

The envelope had a warning message typed on the outside. Inside was a sealed vial containing a substance that tested positive for ricin.