

October 15, 2001

Enclosed are *guidelines* and *procedures* released by the Oregon Department Administrative Services on the handling of suspicious mail items.

The *guidelines* are intended for agencies use in managing internal mail processes; they are not prescriptive and their detailed implementation is not mandatory. Agency management teams are asked to review and revise, if necessary, their mail handling processes in light of these guidelines.

The *procedures* outline steps mail-handlers should take if they discover a suspicious letter or parcel. These procedures are to be distributed to all state employees and placed in an easily accessible for all handle mail.

GUIDELINES

Strange / Suspicious Mail or Parcels

Purpose: The purpose of these guidelines is to provide managers with information to design a course of action for avoiding or minimizing employee contact with harmful substances delivered through mail or other delivery services.

1. Delivery Acceptance Standards

Sources that bring mail and parcels into the state system are the U.S. Postal Service, state government interagency mail system, private couriers and delivery services, and individuals. While it is the policy of the state to maintain normal business operations, additional security measures may be necessary to ensure safety for employees. Additional measures may include the following:

- Accept mail or parcels only from known sources. If your staff are unsure about the identification of a delivery person, they should ask to see credentials.
- Staff should not touch or move mail or parcels that are left unattended on docks, in lobbies, or on desks. Try to determine where the item came from, then contact the sending party by phone to confirm the content. If staff cannot determine where it came from, they should contact State Police in state owned buildings or local police in leased buildings.

2. Mail Handlers

There are two types of mail handlers in state government. There are those who work in large central mail operations whose primary job is to receive, sort, and transport mail to other locations. These are Mail Sorters and Transporters. There are also those who work in operations that require them to open, process, and deliver mail to others in the same location. These are Mail Openers and Processors.

Mail Sorters/Transporters

Employees in large mailrooms are generally exposed to a greater variety and volume of mail than employees in small offices. They receive mail from the U.S. Postal Service, delivery services, and from individuals. Their job is to sort, rout, and transport mail to other locations. They usually do not open or process mail for the agency. Their focus in identifying suspicious materials is primarily the way a parcel or letter is packaged. They are most likely to notice suspicious external characteristics of a letter or parcel.

Mail Openers/Processors

Employees who open, process, and deliver mail in a local area are in a position to recognize suspicious packaging as well as suspicious contents. Because they are more closely connected to the business operations of an agency, they have the advantage of recognizing a parcel or letter that is not from an expected source. They know what type of mail is "normal" for their operation.

However, they are also at a greater risk of contamination. Those who open mail must be particularly careful when opening mail or packages, and be alert to substances such as powder, blotters, or unidentified loose material.

Both types of mail handlers are potentially at risk for hazards arriving in the mail or through couriers. Both groups must know what to look for and how to respond to suspicious mail or packages and the contamination that may accompany them. The following section outlines characteristics of suspicious mail and packages.

3. Identifying Suspicious Mail

A small percentage of federal mail arrives in state offices with incomplete or incorrect addresses. To date, state employees have made every effort to deliver these pieces (in spite of improper addressing) because employees know the common characteristics of their agency's mail. However, what is usual for one agency may be highly irregular for another.

U.S. Postal Inspectors and the FBI indicate that suspicious mail or parcels could include one or more of the following characteristics:

- Is unexpected or from someone unfamiliar to the recipient.
- Is addressed to someone no longer with the organization or is otherwise outdated.
- Has no return address, or has one that can't be verified as legitimate.
- Is of unusual weight, given their size, or are lopsided or oddly shaped.
- Is marked with restrictive endorsements such as "Personal" or "Confidential."
- Has protruding wires, strange odors, or stains.
- Shows a city or state in the postmark that doesn't match the return address.
- Is Foreign Mail, Air Mail, or Special Delivery.
- Has excessive postage.
- Has a hand-written or poorly typed address.
- Includes incorrect titles.
- Includes titles but no names.
- Contains misspelled common words.
- Is a rigid envelope.
- Has excessive securing material such as masking tape, string, etc.
- Contains visual distractions.
- Is leaking unidentified powder.

Mail handling employees must determine whether the mail they receive is “normal” or suspect.

4. Other General Mail Guidelines to Consider

Each agency may want to reconsider policies for handling mail. These policies could include the following:

- Limiting the number of areas where mail is opened.
- Opening mail addressed to high profile positions or programs in a designated mail screening area.
- Instituting additional screening procedures for mail that does not meet the “suspicious” criteria but raises some level of concern.
- Applying the same cautionary standards to interagency mail as used for federal mail.
- Establishing procedures to visually inspect letters before running through automatic opening machines.
- Providing all employees who open mail with immediate access to clear plastic wrap or clear plastic sheets, clear plastic zip-lock bags, non-latex gloves, and particulate masks. Use of masks and gloves is optional until a suspicious substance is identified.

Other Resources

Oregon State Police/Capitol Mall Security: 503-986-1120
Centers for Disease Control Emergency Response: 770-488-7100
Federal Bureau of Investigation (24 Hour Line): 503-224-4181
Oregon Health Division: 503-731-4111
U.S. Postal Service: www.usps.gov

PROCEDURES

Procedures for Receipt or Discovery of a Suspicious Letter or Parcel

In the event an **employee** receives or discovers a suspicious parcel s/he should do the following:

- Remain calm.
- Avoid handling or trying to open the package or envelope. Avoid shaking or trying to empty it.
- Avoid sniffing the package or tasting any substance associated with it.
- If it is a letter and is “not” leaking or losing contents – If possible, place it in clear plastic bag.
- If it is leaking a powder or chemical - If possible, cover the container with clear plastic wrap or clear plastic sheet. Do not try to clean up the substance.
- Isolate the parcel or letter and leave the area. Close the door or section off the area to prevent others from entering.
- Wash hands immediately with soap and water to prevent the spread of contamination.
- Contact the supervisor or evacuation coordinator.

The **supervisor** or evacuation coordinator should:

- Evacuate the immediate area.
- If substance is leaking from the parcel or letter, inform the emergency coordinator, custodial staff or other maintenance staff to activate the automatic HVAC cutoff switch.
- Call the State Police (if in a state owned building in Salem) or local police (if in a leased facility or outside of Salem), and report that you've received a parcel in the mail that may contain suspicious substances.
- Ensure that everyone who had contact with the piece of mail washes his hands with soap and water.
- List all the people who were in the room (or area) when the suspicious letter or package was recognized. Give the list to law enforcement officials for follow-up investigations and advice.

If substance has leaked from the letter or parcel the employee should:

- Remove contaminated clothing as soon as possible. Be prepared to place all items in plastic bags and present them to law enforcement agents if requested.
- Shower with soap and water as soon as possible. Do not use bleach or disinfectant on your skin.

If smoke, fire, visible fumes, or strange odors are emitting from the package, or if people are exhibiting signs of illness including difficulty breathing, or fumes are strong, EVACUATE THE BUILDING AND CALL 911 OR 9+911.