



May 27, 2005

HENRY A. PANKEY  
VICE PRESIDENT, EMERGENCY PREPAREDNESS

SUBJECT: Management Advisory - Response to Incidents Involving Suspicious Mail  
and Unknown Powders and Substances  
(Report Number DA-MA-05-001)

This report presents the results of our self-initiated review to learn how the United States Postal Service responds to incidents involving suspicious mail and unknown powders and substances (Project Number 05WG004DA000). The Postmaster General requested the Office of Inspector General (OIG) review the Postal Inspection Service's practices for handling dangerous mail and suspect packages at the Government Mail Processing Facility in Washington, D.C. Based on that work we initiated this review.

### **Background**

The Postal Service has reported over 20,000 incidents involving suspicious mail and unknown powders and substances since October 2001.<sup>1</sup> While no incidents since the 2001 unprecedented anthrax attacks using the nation's mail system appear to have resulted in health risks to Postal Service employees and/or customers, the Postal Service recognized that some of those incidents were not always adequately managed. As a result, the Postal Service created the headquarters, Office of Emergency Preparedness to address this issue and to develop, implement, and coordinate emergency preparedness plans to protect employees, customers, operations, and mail security. Districts and areas also created Offices of Emergency Preparedness to ensure employees consistently applied policies and procedures for suspicious mail and to provide clear guidance regarding response to suspicious powders.

### **Objective, Scope, and Methodology**

The objective of this review was to determine whether policies, procedures, and guidance regarding suspicious mail were communicated to and understood by Postal

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<sup>1</sup>The Postal Inspection Service established the Suspicious Incident Reporting System to record suspicious incidents.

Service employees and management. To accomplish this, we judgmentally selected for review four districts in two areas that reported a large number of incidents to the Postal Inspection Service's Suspicious Incident Reporting System between September 1, 2001, and August 19, 2004. We interviewed personnel to assess the policies, procedures, and practices in place at selected district offices and made observations and inquiries at six plants and ten associate offices within these districts. In addition, we obtained and reviewed applicable headquarters and local policies, procedures, and documentation.

This review was conducted from January through May 2005 in accordance with the President's Council on Integrity and Efficiency, Quality Standards for Inspections. We discussed our observations and conclusions with appropriate management officials and included their comments where appropriate. We assessed the reliability of the Suspicious Incident Reporting System by verifying computer records to source documents at selected field offices.

### Prior Coverage



### Results

Based on our limited review at the facilities visited, Postal Service managers, supervisors, and employees were generally aware of policies for handling suspicious mail and unknown powders and substances. However, we did find some instances of policy noncompliance, and believe field emergency preparedness managers could enhance employees' awareness and adherence to policies.

In a number of locations, we found conditions like those we reported in September 2004 and May 2005:

- Supervisors at four of the associate offices and two of the plants did not follow established policies, procedures, and guidance when managing suspicious mail incidents. According to district managers, this was because supervisors relied on their judgment or had little experience.
- Supervisors at two of the associate offices did not ensure that the latest policies on suspicious mail and unknown powders and substances were incorporated into emergency planning documents.
- Management at one plant said the Postal Inspection Service advised that it would be appropriate for an employee to handle and bag a suspicious mailpiece involving suspected or alleged biohazard substances.

Further, we found the following additional conditions:

- Supervisors at four of the plants and four of the associate offices did not display suspicious mail posters, decision trees, or flowcharts outlining current national policies. Officials at three districts believed their local flowcharts and decision trees provided adequate guidance.
- One district did not use the September 2004 suspicious mail tabletop exercises to facilitate training and management was not aware this version existed.
- No managers, supervisors, or employees knew that the national Decision Tree for Suspicious Mailpieces had been updated and incorporated into the September 2004 suspicious mail tabletop exercises because an outdated decision tree was referenced under policies and procedures on the Suspicious Mail Web site.
- Management at two of the districts did not require units to document and track incidents involving suspicious mail and unknown powders and substances. Officials at one district office believed this would be duplicative and officials at another district preferred to maintain a record system independent of the Postal Inspection Service's.
- One district had used a contractor since 2002 to respond to and test suspected or alleged biohazard substances found in plants instead of relying on local HAZMAT personnel. District officials claimed that the contractor responded quicker, inspired employee confidence in management, and reduced media exposure.

On February 28, 2005, we briefed the Office of Emergency Preparedness and the Suspicious Mail Working Group on the results of the review. The comments we received show that both are aggressively committed to finding improved ways to handle suspicious mail and unknown powders and substances. We acknowledge the Postal Service's continued efforts in this area, including formation of the Suspicious Mail Working Group to review, consolidate, reconcile, and reissue necessary policies.

### **Recommendations**

We recommend the vice president, Emergency Preparedness:

1. Encourage field emergency preparedness managers to improve employees' awareness of emergency planning and ensure compliance with established policies and procedures.
2. Remove outdated references on the Suspicious Mail Web site.

### **Management's Comments**

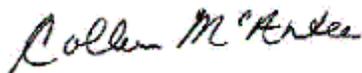
Management indicated agreement with the recommendations stating they were very helpful in reinforcing their own conclusions about the suspicious mail area.

Management agreed to place new suspicious mail policy documents on the Web site by the end of May 2005. Management is currently removing from the site all information and documents containing conflicting procedures to ensure consistency of policy. Management added that new policy documents would also be widely distributed throughout the organization in hard copy format to employees' home addresses within six to eight weeks. In addition, management stated the cross-functional group consisting of managers and specialists from various departments, including Emergency Preparedness, will continue to review and communicate any information to employees consistent with the new policy. Management's comments, in their entirety, are included in the appendix of this report.

### **Evaluation of Management's Comments**

Management's comments are responsive to recommendations 1 and 2 and actions taken and planned should correct the issues identified in the finding.

We appreciate the cooperation and courtesies provided by your staff during the review. If you have any questions, please contact Miguel Castillo, Director, Engineering, or me at (703) 248-2300.



Colleen A. McAntee  
Deputy Assistant Inspector General  
for Field Operations

Attachment

cc: Steven R. Phelps

## APPENDIX. MANAGEMENT'S COMMENTS

HENRY A. PANKEY  
VICE PRESIDENT, EMERGENCY PREPAREDNESS



May 9, 2005

KIM H. STROUD, DIRECTOR, AUDIT REPORTING, OFFICE OF INSPECTOR GENERAL

SUBJECT: Draft Management Advisory - Response to Incidents Involving Suspicious Mail and Unknown Powders and Substances (Report Number DA-MA-05-DRAFT)

This is in reference to your request for a response from the Postal Service's Office of Emergency Preparedness concerning the handling of suspicious mail and unknown powders and substances. Specifically, there were two recommendations made in the April 13<sup>th</sup> memo and we were asked to comment on the recommendations.

1. Encourage field emergency preparedness managers to improve employees' awareness of emergency planning and ensure compliance with established policies and procedures.
2. Remove outdated references on the Suspicious Mail Web site.

The posting of the new policy documents will be finalized on the Emergency Preparedness web page under the suspicious mail link no later than the end of May. All information such as decision trees and other documents on the web page that may contain conflicting procedures will be removed at this time to ensure consistency of policy. The information will also be widely distributed throughout the organization in hard copy format to include a home mailing to all employees within 6 to 8 weeks. By the end of May, the official posting date will be announced and a follow-up message will be sent to the field notifying our operational managers that the information has been placed on the Suspicious Mail web page (located on the Emergency Preparedness web site).

We are committed to improve response to suspicious mail and unknown powders and substances. An ongoing effort to review our manuals, handbooks, and instructions to ensure consistency of policy and procedures is underway. As you know from your review, the Postal Service headquarters has established a cross-functional task group consisting of managers and specialists from safety, emergency preparedness, public affairs and communication, the postal inspection service, aviation mails security, maintenance, operations, transportation, labor and environmental policy. This group will continue their review and will communicate any information to employees consistent with our new policy.

We thank you for the recommendations and find them to be very helpful and reinforcing of our conclusions and planning.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Henry A. Pankey".

Henry A. Pankey

cc: Mr. Potter  
Mr. Donahoe  
Mr. Day

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