

STATEMENT OF
POSTMASTER GENERAL/CEO JOHN E. POTTER
BEFORE THE
COMMITTEE ON GOVERNMENTAL AFFAIRS
UNITED STATES SENATE
OCTOBER 30, 2001

Good morning, Mr. Chairman and members of the Committee.

Just over a week ago, a vicious and premeditated act of evil killed two dedicated Postal Service employees. They were family men. Men active in their communities. Men who had made it their life's work to serve the people of America by keeping the mail moving. Yet, by simply doing their jobs, they became innocent casualties in a war unlike any the nation has ever experienced.

The ultimate sacrifice paid by Thomas Morris and Joseph Curseen has made one thing absolutely clear – the men and women of the Postal Service have been thrust onto the front lines of a conflict that few could have imagined. As we mourn for those we lost, we continue to fulfill our mission with pride, courage, and dedication. I am proud of the tremendous job the employees of the Postal Service are doing during this challenging time.

By its very nature bio-terrorism gives no warning. It creates fear. Fear, that if not dealt with in an honest, forthright manner – with information – can cripple an organization or a nation.

This is an extremely painful time for those of us in the Postal Service. A welcome and ordinary daily visit by our letter carriers to the homes and businesses of America has become, sadly, a cause of concern for some.

Mr. Chairman, over a 23-year career, my expertise has been managing various elements of the nation's huge and complex postal system. It has been my job to protect our employees, to maintain effective and efficient mail service, and to serve the needs of our customers.

I do not have all the answers in this case. I do not believe any single person or organization does. But I can tell you what I do know. Three letters confirmed as containing anthrax moved through the postal system. They were sent to NBC News, Senator Tom Daschle, and the New York Post.

Along with the Secretary of Health and Human Services, the Surgeon General, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, and other federal, state and local medical authorities, the Postal Service continues to monitor closely infection, potential infection, and the presence of anthrax. As we have since the first case was reported, we have taken aggressive action on our own and sought out the recommendations of the medical community. We believed that this was the right thing to do.

Through our experience in following the trail of anthrax-contaminated letters, the infections of postal employees and others, and the discovery of anthrax at postal and other facilities, we developed a four-track response: investigation, education, intervention, and prevention.

Our Postal Inspection Service has been actively involved with the Federal Bureau of Investigation and other law enforcement agencies in investigating these crimes. They are responding to all reports and information being received. And they are dealing sternly with hoaxes and threats that divert needed resources from the investigation.

With the FBI, the Postal Service has offered a \$1 million reward for information leading to the arrest and conviction of those responsible for placing anthrax in the mail. We want to engage the public in helping us bring the guilty to justice.

Before we knew that the mailstream was a conduit for letters containing anthrax, we educated our employees and the American public on safe mail-handling procedures. Postcards were mailed to all of our employees and to postal customers at every address in America. The 145 million postcards contain information about how to identify and safely handle suspicious mail.

We have continued to use every opportunity to educate our employees, our customers, and those in the mailing community so they can protect themselves from possible harm when dealing with the mail.

Internally, we have widely expanded our employee communication efforts throughout the last three weeks. Through mandatory safety talks and other communications – printed, electronic and video – they have received information about the safe handling of mail, including the use of personal protective equipment. One video broadcast on our internal television network features two medical experts from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. We have had medical doctors

visit our major facilities to speak to our employees about anthrax and the necessary safety precautions. We have also made counseling available to all of our employees to help them through this difficult time.

Our educational efforts have also been focused on America's businesses and consumers. We have prepared and distributed thousands of posters and videos to assist mailrooms across the nation in identifying and safely handling suspicious mail. We are continuing our efforts through the media to share similar information with all Americans. This information can also be obtained on the Postal Service's web site, www.usps.com.

We have also taken steps prevent exposure and sanitize the mail. Early on, we also authorized the wearing of protective gloves and face masks for our employees. We have now secured four million N-95 face masks that are effective in filtering 95 percent of microbes, including anthrax spores, from the air, and 86 million pairs of hypoallergenic vinyl and Nitrile gloves.

When we learned that our employees had actually been exposed to anthrax, we took aggressive steps to safeguard them. Over the last two weeks, more than 15,000 employees have begun receiving antibiotic treatment. Some 9,000 have been tested. To date, nine of our 800,000 employees have contracted anthrax. This is nine too many.

We asked all postal employees to provide us with update emergency contact information as well as their current telephone numbers and residential addresses. Our field units are establishing special telephone numbers for employees to call if they are hospitalized. We have also urged employees under medical care to advise the treating physician or hospital that they are Postal Service employees.

In addition to testing and treatment of employees, we also began environmental testing of 30 major processing facilities along the east coast. We are expanding that to 200 processing facilities nationwide as a precautionary measure. As necessary, based on the results of these tests, we will do further testing of our operations downstream from the mail processing facilities. The Army Corps of Engineers is assisting in our testing efforts.

To date, 128 postal facilities have been tested or are in the process of being tested. Approximately 100 downstream offices that receive mail from Trenton and Brentwood are being tested with the help of the Army Corps of Engineers. In addition, with the assistance of the CDC, 260 mailrooms at businesses and

government agencies in the Washington area are being tested.

We have also addressed operational changes aimed at better safeguarding our employees and our customers. We have modified our equipment cleaning procedures to minimize the spread of dust and debris. For routine facility cleaning, we are now using products that are effective in killing anthrax and a number of other bacterial agents.

On Friday, we awarded a contract for the purchase of electron beam systems to sanitize mail as it enters our processing system, with options to purchase more. This equipment has been successfully used in the food and medical industries. In addition, an Ohio firm is now sanitizing targeted mail from our Washington, DC processing facility.

We have performed environmental testing at facilities in Washington, Florida, New Jersey and New York. Where necessary, they have been closed for decontamination. At this time, two New Jersey postal employees have contracted cutaneous anthrax, with two others found to have inhalation anthrax. Two Washington employees remain hospitalized for inhalation anthrax. No employees in Florida or New York have been found to be infected.

Since October 15, when it was established, a Mail Security Task Force has contributed in all of these efforts. Members include the Postal Inspection Service, the Office of Inspector General, medical and safety professionals from the Postal Service, operations managers, representatives of our employee organizations and mailers. This has been a positive and constructive forum. Members are active, they participate, and they listen. They also learn from the information provided to them by guest experts, such as CDC representatives, who have attended meetings.

This mobilization occurred rapidly, just as rapidly as events unfolded over the last three weeks. Here is what we know.

Three letters confirmed as containing anthrax moved through the postal system. To put this into context, since the time the first letters were postmarked on September 18, the Postal Service has delivered more than 25 billion pieces of mail.

In Washington, at the facility where the Senate letter was processed before delivery, two postal employees have died and another two have been hospitalized – all as a result of inhalation anthrax. In New Jersey, where the letters were mailed, two postal employees contracted cutaneous anthrax and two suffer from inhalation anthrax.

Fortunately, there is no indication that postal employees have been infected in Florida or in New York.

Among the targets of the three letters, NBC News, the New York Post and the office of Senator Daschle, two individuals have contracted cutaneous anthrax.

The Postal Service, the CDC, the medical community and the nation are in uncharted territory. Yet we are aggressively seeking answers as we work thorough this fluid and dynamic situation. We have worked closely with the Department of Health and Human Services, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the President's Office of Science and Technology, and state and local health departments. Their knowledge has helped to guide us in our medical and operational responses to the exposure of our employees, our customers and our facilities.

Let me start at the beginning. Like the entire nation, we learned of a possible link between anthrax and the mail late on October 8 when news reports indicated a possible connection in the Florida case. The Postal Inspection Service immediately began to assist the FBI in its investigation. And during that week, we provided all of our employees with information about safe mail-handling procedures and how to identify symptoms of anthrax infection.

On October 12 we learned that an employee of NBC News had contracted cutaneous anthrax. The following day, we learned for the first time that it was linked to a letter that came through the mail. This was the first affirmative between anthrax and the mail. On the same day, we issued additional communications to our employees about safe mail handling, including an advisory about using gloves and masks when handling mail. We were advised that there was no special risk to our employees but, in dealing with an unknown situation, we felt it best to take these precautions.

The following day, since we had learned of a link with the mail in the NBC case, we began testing Boca Raton employees for anthrax exposure. All results were negative. However, as a precaution, 30 of that facility's 109 employees began taking antibiotics. Health authorities advised that there was no threat to the other 79 employees but they, too, were offered antibiotics. Environmental testing found trace results of anthrax at the facility. It was decontaminated.

On Saturday, October 27, employees at the West Palm Beach facility began receiving medication. To date, there have been no recorded cases of anthrax infection among Florida postal employees.

In the Florida case, as in virtually all other medical and environmental actions we

have taken, we acted after receiving the advice of federal, state and local health authorities.

At the same time, unknown to us, an anthrax-tainted letter to Senator Daschle was moving through our system. On October 15, we learned through the media that letter had been received and opened in the Senator's office.

During this period, we redoubled our internal communications efforts so that all postal employees had additional knowledge about protecting themselves from anthrax and other harmful material that might be in the mail. These included stand-up safety talks, a special program on our internal television network featuring two medical experts from CDC. At the same time, we revised our policy for cleaning dust and debris from mail processing equipment.

Senator Daschle's office, which had received and opened a letter containing anthrax, was contaminated. Testing revealed contamination in other locations of the Hart Senate Office Building.

Testing of Senate employees for anthrax exposure began Monday, October 15. By Wednesday, October 17, we learned that Senate staffers had tested positive for exposure. We contacted the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention to determine if similar activities were necessary for employees of our Brentwood Processing and Distribution Center. We were advised that because the Senate letter was well sealed, our employees were not at risk and no action was necessary.

The next day, October 18, we held a press conference at Brentwood to announce the \$1 million reward. This site was selected because, based on medical information, we understood that there were no problems at that location. We felt it was important to let employees, the public and the media know that we were taking the appropriate steps to keep the mail, and those who were in contact with it, safe.

We had also independently arranged for environmental testing of the Brentwood facility as a precautionary measure. Initial field test results were negative but, laboratory test results, which we received on October 22 showed that areas of the building were contaminated with anthrax. However, we had closed the facility as a precaution on October 21, after learned that two facility employees were ill with inhalation anthrax. CDC environmental tests, which began on October 22, later confirmed the contamination.

Because the duties of one of the hospitalized Brentwood employees involved visits

to the Air Mail Facility at Baltimore Washington International Airport, that facility was also closed, as a precautionary measure, on October 21. Medical testing of Brentwood and BWI employees began on October 21 and they were placed on antibiotics.

On the same day, we learned that the worst had happened – a Brentwood employee, not previously identified as being infected, died. The following day, this tragic event was followed by similar news that another employee, also not known to be infected, died. In both cases, the employees had contracted inhalation anthrax.

Meanwhile, we had learned that two New Jersey employees had contracted cutaneous anthrax. We learned only this week from CDC officials that two others have confirmed cases of inhalation anthrax. Environmental tests disclosed spores at our offices in Hamilton Township and West Trenton, and they were closed for decontamination on October 19. Through both CDC and state health authorities, employees at the affected facilities were tested and received antibiotics. As a precaution, we are also testing other Trenton-area facilities.

All of these actions will have a dramatic impact on our finances. We must recoup the expenses incurred with bio-terrorism. We must pay for testing, masks, gloves and sanitization equipment and services. We did not anticipate the expenses connected with the anthrax attacks on top of an already bleak financial outlook. This outlook had already been clouded by revenue loss associated with all of the events that began with the September 11 attacks.

Against this backdrop, we are grateful that the White House has committed \$175 million to help the Postal Service pay for the supplies and equipment we are initially obtaining to protect the safety of our employees, our customers, and the mail. We are extremely grateful for this funding. It is an important step in our long range efforts to protect the mail.

Management and the national leadership of the four principal employee unions and the three organizations that represent postmasters, supervisors and management employees are working extremely closely on this issue. The advice, suggestions and support of our employee representatives are critical to our ability to take a productive and unified approach to protecting all of our employees, both craft and management. We continue to meet daily and consult and plan together as we implement and expand our efforts.

We have learned a great deal through this experience. Initially, we did experience

communication problems, sometimes receiving critical information through the media, not from other agencies. The different focuses of various law enforcement and health organizations occasionally resulted in parties speaking different “languages.” And, absent an established protocol, lines of authority could occasionally be unclear. With the establishment of the Office of Homeland Security under the leadership of Governor Tom Ridge, we have experienced a significant improvement in this area.

We have learned that there is no effective and quick method to test facilities for anthrax. With this in mind, we have implemented a structured expansion of our facility testing to 30 sites. The distribution of a 10-day supply of antibiotics to employees during the testing period reflects the inability to test quickly.

However, we have learned much. Our employees and the public are far better informed than they have ever been on this issue. We have implemented better operational procedures that can help minimize anthrax transmission. And we have also improved our maintenance processes. We have come extremely far in so short a period.

I have described a great many actions. But we will not stop there. We cannot. As the entire nation has been reminded through this crisis, the mail is a critical part of our national infrastructure – it is not an option. It is a major element of our personal and business communications, and it will remain so. That is why we will continue our efforts – whatever it takes and as long as it takes – to defeat the enemy we are facing today. It will take the contributions of many people and many organizations working closely together toward this single goal if we are to prevail. And I believe we will.

I want to assure you that we are not underestimating in any way the challenge of protecting a system that is so vast. We will find the right balance between protecting our employees and customers and delivering on our historic mission of operating an effective and efficient Postal Service that remains both safe and accessible.

In closing, I would like to recognize the men and women of the Postal Service. They have demonstrated an incredible commitment to public service during this challenging period. I am proud of each and every one of them.

Thank you.