

**Terrorism Through the Mail: Protecting Postal Workers and the Public**  
**Senator Joe Lieberman**  
**October 30, 2001**

This morning our Committee begins the first of two hearings on "Terrorism Through the Mail: Protecting Postal Workers and the Public." The full committee is holding this hearing in conjunction with the subcommittee on International Security, Proliferation and Federal Services, chaired by Senator Daniel Akaka, and is being conducted pursuant to its jurisdiction over the U.S. Postal Service which the rules of the Senate rules give the Committee. Protecting the safety of the public and those working for the U.S. Postal System, on what has become an unexpected front line of defense against terrorism, is an urgent priority, so I'd like to thank all of our witnesses this morning for rearranging their schedules to be at this hearing on short notice.

On September 11, as we all know, terrorists wreaked sudden, mass destruction upon the financial and military centers of the free world. Since then, a slower, more insidious attack has been launched against our postal system - and into government and media mailrooms - in the form of anthrax contained within sealed letters and packages. This new terrorist attack has been more difficult to detect, and has emerged slowly over a period of weeks. So far, it has struck in Florida, New York, New Jersey, Virginia and 12 separate places here in Washington, catching authorities off guard and surprising even those who have been preparing for a bioterrorist attack.

Three people are dead, two of them postal workers, and at least 10 others have been diagnosed with either cutaneous or inhalation anthrax. Thirty-two people have tested positive for exposure to anthrax. Thousands are taking powerful antibiotics as a precaution. And all Americans are asking themselves a very basic question: is it safe to open the mail?

This morning, our committee wants to find out what the answer is to that question and whether adequate steps were taken to protect postal workers - and, for that matter, anyone who opens their mail- once it was known that the mails were being used to further terrorize the American people. We want to take stock of what we have learned from this experience and assess what needs to be done to properly protect those who work for the Postal Service and those who depend on its services.

The transmission of anthrax through the mail was confirmed Friday, October 12, when an NBC employee was diagnosed with cutaneous anthrax after opening a letter addressed to Tom Brokaw. Federal officials and the Postal Service apparently thought the risk of inhalation anthrax was negligible until two mail workers, now being treated in Virginia and New Jersey, were diagnosed with it over a week later. The disease transmission model everyone expected

was through the skin, as had been the case with the NBC employee. And, apparently, no one anticipated that anthrax spores would leak out of mail envelopes in sufficient quantities to cause infection. So gloves and masks were not required, and, in fact, are still not required for postal employees. The question many are asking, admittedly, with 20/20 hindsight, is should someone have recognized what now seems like an obvious concern not only about those receiving envelopes with anthrax but about the safety of the men and women who work in the mail system that delivered them.

In Washington, the Postal Service began environmental testing for anthrax at its main facility at Brentwood on Thursday, October 18, three days after the letter sent to Majority Leader Daschle was opened in the Hart Building, exposing 28 people. At the time, Postmaster General Potter said he was advised there was only a “minute chance” that anthrax spores escaped into the air at the Brentwood facility. But two days later, contamination at Brentwood was verified. The facility was closed down and testing of the Brentwood workers began the next day. Thomas L. Morris, a worker at Brentwood, died that day, while Joseph P. Curseen, Jr., another Brentwood worker, was sent home from the hospital with a flu diagnosis and he died the next day. So questions are naturally being asked: Should health workers have been on the lookout for possible anthrax infection? Should environmental and worker testing have begun sooner than it did? Did the Centers for Disease Control and the Postal Service take too passive an approach toward postal workers and the public? We ask these questions in the spirit of analysis - urgent analysis - which is aimed at finding out, amidst this new challenge, how to best deal with a crisis like this, should there be a next time. It is particularly important that we end what has been called a “multi-voiced disharmony” from government officials in recent weeks.

It quickly became clear to us how much the experts do not know. There is no relevant clinical experience, no standard survey methodology, no comparable operational history and no understanding of the full magnitude of the biological threat being perpetrated. As the *New York Times* said on October 28, inhalation anthrax is a disease that almost no doctor in the United States has ever seen. We were originally told that it takes 8,000 to 10,000 inhaled anthrax spores to become infected. But I recently read a quote from the head of an infectious disease center that that was a textbook answer based on clinical studies done decades ago of workers who handled animal hides. So we ask ourselves, why weren't we told this?

One of the most encouraging developments in all of this has been the appointment of Governor Ridge as the lead government spokesman on issues of homeland security. . He and others in positions of authority need to tell the truth to the American people and if they don't yet know the truth, then they need to tell us that as well. Otherwise, in this time of crisis, the federal government risks losing the credibility and trust it has gained from the American people in the first stages of the war against terrorism.

In recent days, the postal service and public health officials have taken increasingly aggressive actions. Mail destined for Washington from unknown shippers will be irradiated in Ohio until the Postal Service can install \$2.5 billion worth of irradiation devices. More broadly, the Service is in the process of revising mail collection procedures to minimize handling prior to irradiation. Over 6000 D.C.-area postal employees have been given antibiotics while an equivalent number in New York has been tested or is receiving treatment, although it seems that conflicting advice is being given as to the recommended length of treatment.

The bottom line here is the Postal Service is at the heart of this nation's critical infrastructure and is one of the foundations of our quality of life. Businesses and individuals that depend on it comprise a significant portion of our Gross Domestic Product. In other words, it is too important to too many people to allow these problems or anxieties with the mail system to fester. We will take a hard look today at what we need to do to restore public confidence in the mails, to protect postal workers, and, therefore, to help set things right again.