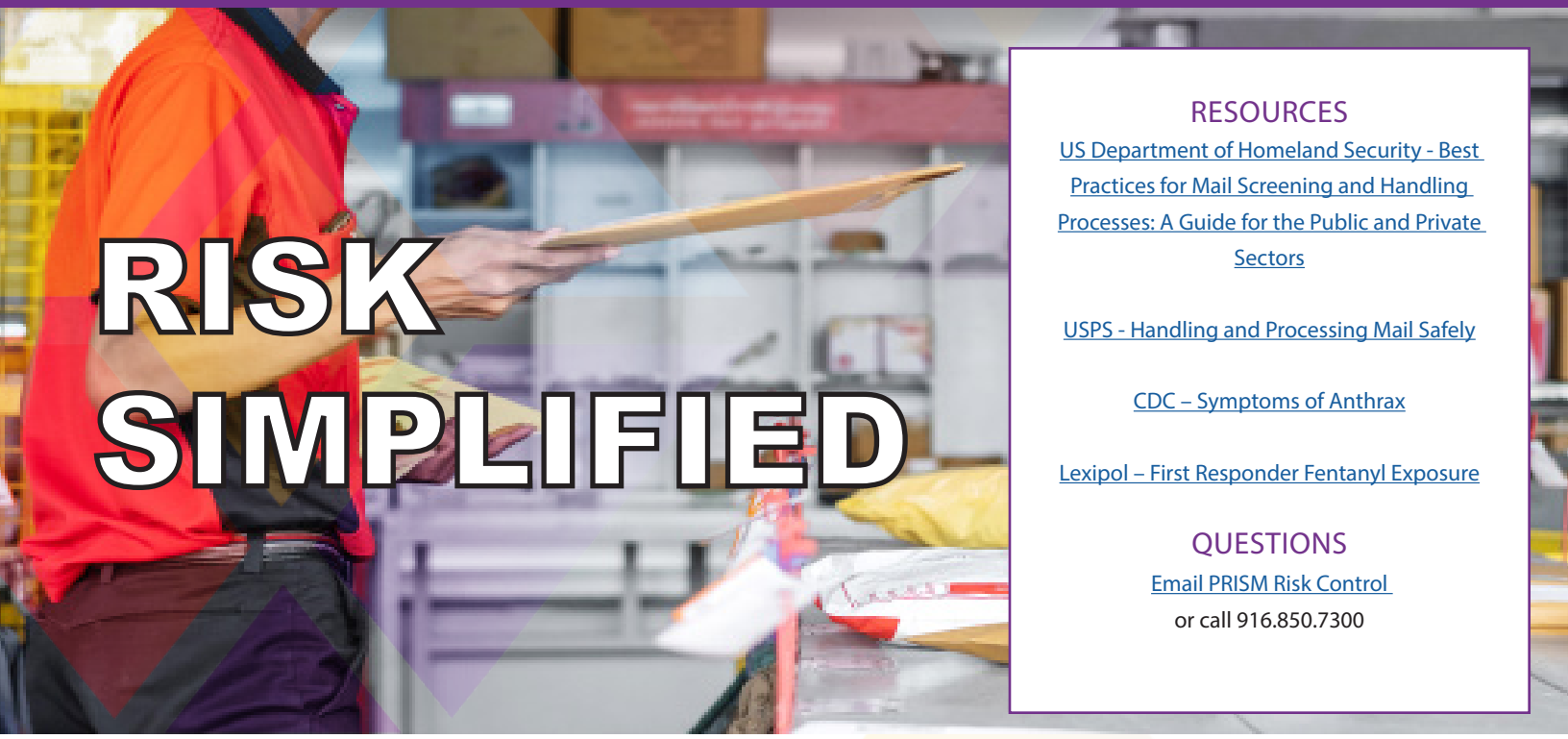


RESOURCES

US Department of Homeland Security - Best Practices for Mail Screening and Handling Processes: A Guide for the Public and Private Sectors

USPS - Handling and Processing Mail Safely

CDC – Symptoms of Anthrax

Lexipol – First Responder Fentanyl Exposure

QUESTIONS

Email PRISM Risk Control

or call 916.850.7300

Suspicious Mail Handling

by Chandler Wright

Agencies across California receive mail on a regular basis. Both letters and packages have the potential to contain dangerous material that can be harmful to the employees that handle them. Potential hazards when handling mail include exposure to harmful substances such as anthrax or fentanyl, and explosives. While not very common, each of these hazards can prove to be dangerous, and even fatal, so proper precautions must be considered when handling any mail.

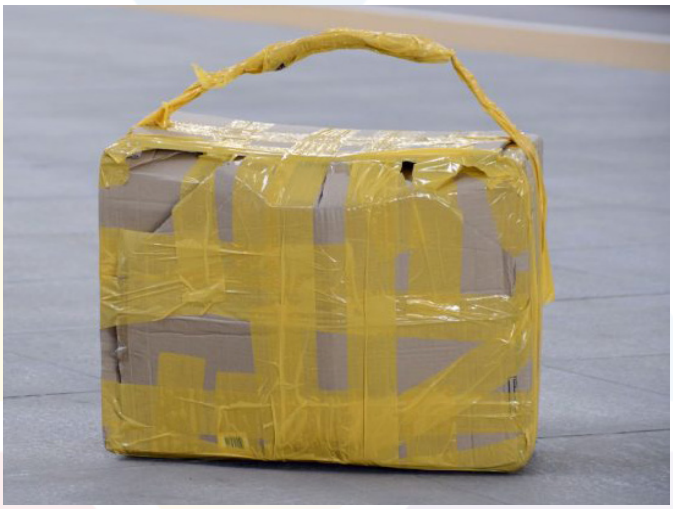
What to Look for:

When working around mail, it is important for employees to be able to identify abnormalities associated with potentially dangerous packages. Employees should be trained on what to look for, as well as the common exposure symptoms related to anthrax and fentanyl. Links to the different exposure symptoms can be found in the resources section of this document. Common warning signs of potentially malicious mail include:

- Unusual amounts of postage or tape,
- Incorrect job titles,
- Only the job title being listed rather than the recipient's name,
- Powdery substances, whether on the outside on the inside,
- Unexplained dampness,
- No return address or one that can't be verified,
- Unusual weight according to its size,

- Strange odors, stains, or visible wiring,
- Misspelling of common words, and
- Weird noises, such as ticking

Just because a package or piece of mail exhibits the warning signs above does not necessarily mean that it is immediately dangerous. It should however cause employees to pause and investigate the item more closely. The above list is not all inclusive. Employees should trust their intuition and take caution with any piece of mail that appears suspicious in any way.



Handling Suspicious Items:

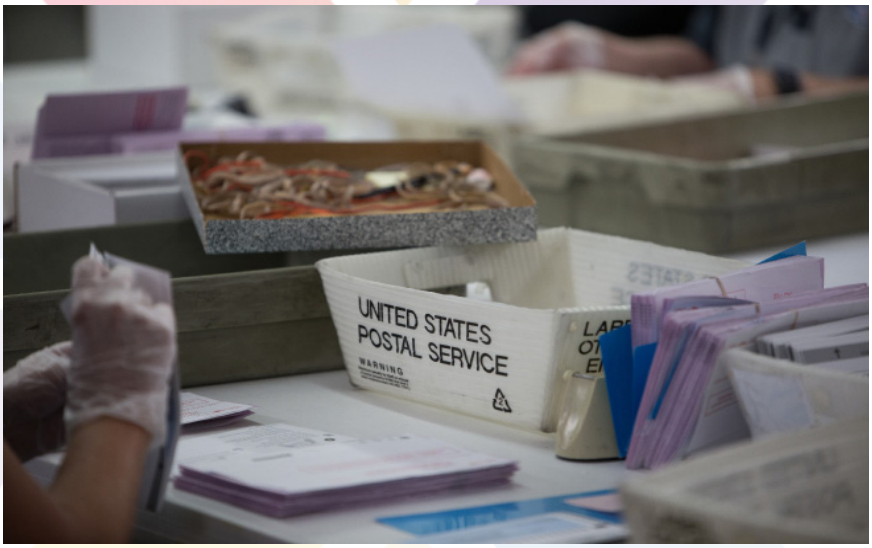
Employees who identify a package as possibly containing hazardous materials should proceed with caution. The most important thing to do is to remain calm and not panic. If an employee believes they have discovered a suspicious looking package, they should:

- Not handle the letter or package any more than is necessary.
- Carefully put the item down, taking care not to shake, bump, or empty any contents.
- Cover the item carefully with anything that is available (coats, paper, bags, etc.). This will help to prevent substances from becoming airborne.
- Notify the proper individuals, such as their supervisor, and ensure that 911 has been called to alert local authorities.
- Calmly leave the area and notify others to do so as well. Do not rush, as this may create unnecessary panic.
    - If the danger appears to be chemical or biological, remain in the room until the substance can be cleared. Leaving may cause it to spread to more people.
- Avoid touching their eyes, nose, or mouth.
- Wash their hands immediately with soap and warm water for at least one minute.
- Maintain a safe physical distance from the item.

If a suspicious piece of mail is identified, steps should be taken to secure the item and have it checked by trained individuals. Employees that open and/or receive mail should be trained on these procedures. To help reduce the chance of exposure from suspicious mail, a separate room should be identified as the mail room, and only certain employees should be responsible for screening and opening mail. This helps to ensure that if there is an exposure event, it is isolated.

Risk Analysis:

Agencies should complete a risk analysis to determine what policies and procedures should be implemented to best protect employees from the hazards related to handling mail. In order to effectively analyze the mail handling process, agencies should consider the type of mail, such as



envelopes, packages, and election ballots, the quantity, and the various pieces of equipment used in the process.

Some circumstances, such as elections, will cause an increase in the amount of mail that is received and processed. This increase in quantity brings with it an increase in the number of potential hazards to which employees may be exposed. Developing safe mail handling procedures for both normal and large quantities of mail will help ensure that employees are able to work safely in any given environment. Employees should be trained on all mail handling policies and procedures.

Equipment, such as mail sorters, must also be given consideration when completing a risk analysis as they can cause powder substances like anthrax and fentanyl to be released into the air. In order to help prevent this from occurring, agencies should consider implementing a high efficiency filtration system that can trap any harmful particles before they are inhaled by the employees. If these systems are not adequate to protect employees, respiratory protection for the employees should be considered.

Conducting a risk analysis will help agencies determine the risk level that their employees face while handling mail and whether or not personal protective equipment (PPE) is appropriate. PPE, such as gloves, smocks, safety goggles, and respiratory protection are available to help keep employees safe. When the exposure increases, such as when larger quantities of mail are being processed, the use of PPE should be considered. Employees that have cuts or open injuries on their hands should also consider wearing gloves to prevent any harmful substances from entering their bodies.

All agencies should look at their mail handling procedures and determine whether or not they are adequate in protecting employees from the different hazards associated with handling suspicious mail. Employees that are well trained on what to look for when handling mail will be more likely to identify and prevent threats.

If you have any questions, please reach out to PRISM's Risk Control Department.