

Governor's Column – 10/21/01

Mississippi Takes Lead For Anthrax Preparation

The threat of bioterrorism in the wake of the September 11 attacks has taken every American to a heightened state of awareness. We are a little more cautious about our surroundings; we're paying a little more attention to the details. The incidents of anthrax exposure in Florida, New York and Washington have us more concerned about the mail system and the potential for something being transmitted through that avenue.

First, we must be educated about anthrax and the facts surrounding the recent incidents. Anthrax is not contagious. If caught early, it can be treated with antibiotics. The individuals who have been exposed in New York and Washington are expected to make full recoveries. It is also important to note there is a difference between being *exposed* to anthrax and being *infected* by anthrax.

Second, the postal service handles hundreds of millions of pieces of mail on a daily basis. There have only been a handful of confirmed cases of anthrax being sent through the mail in recent weeks. While we must be cautious about our mail, we cannot allow our fears to bring our daily routines to a halt. When opening your mail, look for signs like a return address that doesn't match the postmark, stains on the package or envelope, and misspelled words in the name or address. More information is available at my website at www.governor.state.ms.us.

At the state level, the Department of Public Safety is currently preparing training seminars for state employees who handle mail. They will be taught what to look for and how to handle suspicious letters and packages.

Third, Mississippi is prepared for whatever may happen. There have been incidents here in the state where individuals were concerned about anthrax, but there have been no confirmed incidents of anthrax, in any form, anywhere in the state. In cases where a powdery substance was found, law enforcement and public safety officials have responded quickly and handled the situation by the book.

This past week, officials from the State Department of Health, the Mississippi Emergency Management Agency, the Department of Public Safety, the Department of Environmental Quality, the State Fire Marshal's Office, the United States Postal Service and the Federal Bureau of Investigation sat down to discuss how to handle the situation here in Mississippi. After meeting for eight hours, they had put together a protocol for all emergency, law enforcement and public safety agencies to follow when dealing with anthrax and threats of anthrax. The hard work of these agencies prompted one federal agent to comment that Mississippi was taking a lead role among the states in pulling all of its agencies together to handle any threats.

To strengthen the efforts of these agencies, I issued an executive order to implement an incident management system for the state, based on the National Interagency Incident Management System used by the federal government. This system will ensure that, in emergency situations, all state and local agencies will use "common terminology, integrated communications, incident action plans, unified command, and comprehensive management of resources during emergencies or disasters."

In other words, there won't be any duplication of efforts, confusion about responsibilities or problems with communication during any type of emergency situation within the state. Mississippi is prepared.

Finally, it is important to remind those who would use the current fears in the nation for their own amusement that the penalties for threatening terrorism are stiff. Anyone caught making threats about anthrax or using any type of powder as part of those threats will be prosecuted to the fullest extent of the law. People are truly concerned about what's happening in our nation and our world, and it is not something to be taken lightly or used for making threats as a joke.

As President Bush has said, we are in this for the long haul. We are going to hunt down those who would bring terrorism within our borders, and we are going to bring them to justice. It won't happen overnight, and until we complete that task we need to remain calm, cautious and controlled about what we do here at home. The best way to do that is by being prepared to handle any situation that may come along.

Mississippi is prepared.