



ELECTION MAIL HANDLING PROCEDURES TO PROTECT AGAINST HAZARDOUS MATERIALS



OVERVIEW

Over the past two decades, U.S. government offices and employees have been the target of multiple incidents using letters containing hazardous materials, including suspicious letters mailed to election offices in California, Georgia, Nevada, Oregon, and Washington in 2023. Since mail is a key component of both standard office operations and mail balloting across the country, this guidance document provides background information for election offices on how to:

- Prepare to handle suspicious mail;
- Identify potentially suspicious mail; and
- Respond to potential hazardous materials exposure while handling suspicious mail.

PREPARING TO HANDLE SUSPICIOUS MAIL

All election offices should have procedures in place to handle mail and respond to potential hazardous materials exposure, and all personnel should be trained on these procedures. Procedures will vary across jurisdictions, depending on the size of the jurisdiction and number of personnel handling mail, among other factors.¹ While some larger election offices have dedicated mail processing facilities, the majority of election offices do not. In these smaller offices, mail screening activities for election and non-election mail are often conducted within the same building that serves as the primary election office location. In either situation, the following considerations will prepare staff to handle suspicious mail:

- **Mail Handling Location:** Mail handling should take place in an isolated area with direct access to the outside of the building, limiting movement of mail within the building prior to screening. If direct outside access is not feasible, mail should be processed in a location that minimizes the spread of any potential hazardous material, such as a room with doors that can be closed. Inside this location should be prominently displayed signs which highlight suspicious letter and package indicators as visual guides for mail handling.
- **Personal Protective Equipment (PPE):** When handling any type of mail, offices should make available to staff handling mail a smock or apron, mask or respirator.² and nitrile gloves with a minimum thickness of 5 mil. These items help protect individuals from potential exposure to hazards.
- **Naloxone/Narcan:** Given the use of fentanyl as a potential hazard in targeted attacks against election offices, consider having on hand a minimum of two doses of Naloxone per person handling mail. Naloxone, often referred to by its brand name Narcan™, is a life-saving medication that can reverse an overdose from opioids like fentanyl, and has no effect on someone who does not have opioids in their system.³ Naloxone is easy to use, available in all 50 states, D.C., and territories, and can be purchased from a local pharmacy without a prescription in most states.⁴ Staff should know where this medication is located and be trained in proper usage. For more information on how to obtain and use Naloxone/Narcan, election officials should contact their jurisdiction's health department.

¹ Election officials can refer to the United States Postal Inspection Service Guide to [Mail Center Security](#) for guidance on how to assess their risk level, establish sound security protocols and how to handle suspicious mail.

² Issuance of masks or respirators to personnel must be done in consultation with an appropriate medical authority and in compliance with OSHA standard [1910.134](#)

³ "Naloxone Drug Facts," National Institute of on Drug Abuse, <https://nida.nih.gov/publications/drugfacts/naloxone>

⁴ "Fentanyl Facts," Centers for Disease Control, <https://www.cdc.gov/stopoverdose/fentanyl/>

IDENTIFYING SUSPICIOUS MAIL

Below are some common external characteristics of suspicious mail associated with criminal activity. Some of these indicators, such as unusual markings, excessive tape, and excessive postage, are also typical characteristics of legitimate election mail received from uniformed service members, overseas citizens, and other sources.



No Return Address

Restrictive Markings (e.g.,
Fragile, Confidential, etc.)Poorly Wrapped,
Excessive Tape

Improper Spelling

Badly Typed or Conspicuously
Written AddressesUnknown Powder or Suspicious
Substances Outside EnvelopeUnexpected Mail from a
Foreign CountryExcessive Postage,
No Postage, Not Canceled

RESPONDING TO POTENTIAL TOXIC EXPOSURE

The general best practices outlined below protect against the three potentially lethal powders of greatest concern, fentanyl, anthrax, and ricin, in addition to more routine mail hazards. Election officials are not expected to know what type of hazardous material they may be encountering; however, they should be trained on and regularly exercise response procedures. If a potential hazardous material exposure occurs, election workers should take the following steps:

1. Call 911 to request local law enforcement and emergency medical services (EMS).
2. Avoid actions that may cause powder to become airborne—do not move the mail piece around, shake out the contents, or blow on it. If possible, place a garbage can or other container over the mail piece and/or spilled powder. Leave items in place.
3. Leave the room where the potential hazardous material is and close the door.
4. Isolate the immediate area and provide warnings to personnel not to enter the area. If possible, turn off ventilation or HVAC systems or contact building maintenance to do so.
5. Do not touch your eyes, mouth, nose, or any skin after touching any potentially contaminated surface.
6. Remove any clothing or other items worn that may be contaminated with powder, including mail handling PPE. Place the items inside a plastic bag or under a garbage can. If possible, do not pull clothes over the head.
7. Wash skin thoroughly with cool water and soap. **Do NOT use hand sanitizers or any alcohol-based cleaners or bleach**, as they may enhance absorption.
8. Account for all people who were in the room where the potential exposure occurred and keep them together, outside if possible, until emergency responders arrive.
9. If possible, avoid direct contact with any other person.
10. As soon as practical report the incident details to the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) and the United States Postal Inspection Service (USPIS). Contact your FBI Election Crimes Coordinator or your FBI WMD Coordinator through your local field office: <https://www.fbi.gov/contact-us/field-offices> or report to the FBI's national tip line at 1-800-CALL-FBI (1-800-225-5324). Contact USPIS at 1-877-876-2455.

If the exposed individual(s) demonstrate signs of a fentanyl or opioid overdose, use these additional steps recommended by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Symptoms of overdose may include small, constricted pupils; falling asleep or losing consciousness; slow, weak, or no breathing; choking or gurgling sounds; limp body; cold and/or clammy skin; or discolored skin (especially in lips and nails).⁵

⁵ "Fentanyl Facts" Centers for Disease Control, <https://www.cdc.gov/stopoverdose/fentanyl/>

1. Administer Naloxone, if available. If Naloxone is not available, rescue breathing can be a lifesaving measure until EMS arrives. Use standard basic life support safety precautions (e.g., mask, gloves, etc.) to reduce the risk of exposure.
2. Try to keep the person awake and breathing.
3. Lay the person on their side to prevent choking.
4. Stay with the person until emergency assistance arrives.

HAZARDOUS MATERIALS USED IN ATTACKS USING MAIL/LETTERS

	FENTANYL	ANTHRAX	RICIN
DESCRIPTION	<p>Fentanyl is a powerful synthetic opioid 50 to 100 times more potent than morphine. As little as two milligrams, about the size of 5 grains of salt, can cause negative health effects.</p> <p>Skin exposure to powdered or dry forms of fentanyl is not likely to cause overdoses in small amounts if promptly removed. Inhalation of airborne powder is most likely to lead to harmful effects but is less likely to occur than skin contact. Liquid or large amounts of solid fentanyl can be absorbed rapidly via skin and can be extremely toxic.⁶</p>	<p>Anthrax is a serious infectious disease caused by a naturally occurring bacteria that can be dried, purified, and made into a powder. Inhalation anthrax is the most serious form of infection. Skin contact with anthrax is the most common form of infection and is considered the least dangerous. Infection usually develops from 1 to 7 days after exposure.⁷</p>	<p>Ricin is a poison found in castor beans and can be weaponized through a very technically difficult and complicated process. Ricin is unlikely to be absorbed through normal skin, and it is also very difficult to produce ricin that retains the physical properties which make it easy to inhale. Most ricin poisonings have occurred when the ricin was injected or swallowed. Symptoms of ricin poisoning are most likely to occur within 4 to 12 hours if the ricin was inhaled or swallowed.⁸</p>
SYMPTOMS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Respiratory distress, respiratory depression or arrest ▪ Drowsiness ▪ Dizziness ▪ Disorientation ▪ Pinpoint pupils ▪ Loss of consciousness ▪ Nausea/vomiting 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Fever and chills ▪ Chest discomfort ▪ Shortness of breath ▪ Confusion or dizziness ▪ Cough ▪ Nausea, vomiting, or stomach pains ▪ Headache ▪ Heavy sweating 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Respiratory distress ▪ Fever ▪ Cough ▪ Nausea ▪ Tightness in the chest ▪ Heavy sweating ▪ Fluid building up in the lungs

FURTHER INFORMATION

- Election officials can refer to the [USPIS Guide to Mail Center Security](#) for guidance on how to assess their risk level, establish sound security protocols, and how to handle suspicious mail.
- Election officials can refer to the [USPS Poster 84](#) to download and post a visual guide to suspicious mail indicators in the room where mail is handled.
- Additional information about election official security, can be found at <https://www.eac.gov/election-officials/election-official-security>
- State, territorial, and District of Columbia health department websites can be found at <https://www.cdc.gov/publichealthgateway/healthdirectories/healthdepartments.html>

⁶ "Prevention of Occupational Exposure to Fentanyl and Other Opioids." National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences. https://tools.niehs.nih.gov/wetp/public/hasl_get_blob.cfm?ID=11206

⁷ "What is Anthrax", Centers for Disease Control; <https://www.cdc.gov/anthrax/basics/index.html>

⁸ "Facts About Ricin," Centers for Disease Control, <https://emergency.cdc.gov/agent/ricin/facts.asp>