

Handling Suspicious Packages and Letters

Resource Type: Articles

Topic: Crisis Management, Crisis Communications, Facility, Program and Transportation Safety

Mailroom security, an area often overlooked as policies and procedures are created or updated to reduce risks and losses, has risen in importance following the biological scares in late 2001. Small government entities or nonprofit organizations are especially vulnerable because many don't have a centralized mailroom or designate a single person to receive and distribute the mail.

Although relatively low cost and simple in design, chemical and biological weapons haven't been prevalent in the United States up to now according to the U.S. Postal Service. The USPS says, "The chances are considerably greater of receiving a telephoned bomb threat or finding a suspicious and potentially harmful device placed at your office or on your property" than receiving a mail bomb. However, these weapons or the threat of their use are disruptive forces and you want to take a proactive preventive stance.

Suspicious Letter and Package Indicators

The first step is to post a list of typical characteristics that should alert employees to a suspicious package. This should be distributed to everyone who receives or opens letters and packages at your entity or organization. Ideally, this will be the mailroom supervisor or staff members serving as the mail point person. Hold a meeting to explain the added precautions, if they are new to your entity or organization, or to refresh the memory of staff where these procedures are in place.

General Suspicious Mail Indicators

Be Suspicious of any Letter or Package that:

- Has any powdery substance on the outside.
- Is unexpected or from someone unfamiliar to you.
- Has excessive postage, is handwritten or contains a poorly typed address, incorrect title or just a title with no name, or misspells common words.
- Is addressed to someone no longer with your organization or is otherwise outdated.
- Has no return address or one that can't be verified as legitimate.
- Is of unusual weight, given its size, or is lopsided or oddly shaped.
- Has an unusual amount of tape on it.
- Is marked with restrictive endorsements, such as "Personal" or "Confidential."
- Has strange odors or stains, or protruding wires.

(adapted from www.usps.com)

Policies and Procedures

The second step is to review your entity's or organization's policies and procedures for handling mail and package deliveries and distribution. Some of the questions you'll want to ask are:

- Is it possible to streamline the process?
- Can you identify a single person and an alternate responsible for receiving, and screening letters and parcels prior to distributing these items to the staff?

- Is there a separate room that can be designated as the mailroom?
- What type of training is supplied for mailroom personnel?
- How is their training updated? How often?
- What guidelines are provided to mailroom personnel for identifying and reporting suspicious packages or letters?
- How are personnel to verify that a delivery is expected?
- Where can personnel refer to verify a return address is legitimate?
- What should other employees do if they receive a parcel they aren't expecting or which can't be explained?
- What is the chain of command for reporting suspicious deliveries?

Following are some *Suspicious Mail Guidelines* provided by the [U.S. Postal Service](#) on mail security. They address general suspicions and specifics for bomb threats, radiological threats, biological or chemical threats.

Don't Open Any Parcel Until Verified as Safe

Suspicious Mail Guidelines

If you receive a suspicious letter or package:

- Handle with care. Don't shake or bump.
- Don't open, smell, touch or taste it.
- Isolate it immediately.
- Treat it as suspect. Call local law enforcement authorities.

If a letter/parcel is open and/or a threat is identified:

For a Bomb:

- Evacuate immediately.
- Call police.
- Contact postal inspectors.
- Call local fire department/Hazmat unit.

For Radiological:

- Limit exposure—don't handle.
- Evacuate area (distance yourself).
- Shield yourself from the object.
- Call police.
- Contact postal inspectors.
- Call local fire department/Hazmat unit.

For Biological or Chemical:

- Isolate—Don't handle.
- Wash your hands with soap and warm water.
- Call police.
- Contact postal inspectors.
- Call local fire department/Hazmat unit.

You may also want to review resources from the [Federal Bureau of Investigation](#) and the [Centers for Disease Control](#) for additional information and resources.

More Information

Read our book on crisis management: [Vital Signs: Anticipating, Preventing and Surviving Crisis in a Nonprofit](#).