

# **Fire and Police Guide to the Handling of Suspicious Packages or Letters**

- **Maryland Department of the Environment**
- **Maryland Emergency Management Agency**

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## **Fire and Police Guide to the Handling of Suspicious Packages or Letters**

A number of businesses and individuals throughout Maryland have received letters or packages that have caused the recipients to be suspicious. Some of these packages claim to contain anthrax. Most of the envelopes have been empty but some have contained powdery substances. The purpose of these guidelines is to recommend procedures for fire and police responders in the handling of such incidents.

Responders handling “unknown” or suspicious spilled substances, shall meet minimum competencies at the “Haz-Mat Technician” level, as required by:

**OSHA: 29 CFR 1910.120**

**EPA: 40 CFR 311**

**NFPA: 471, 472, 473**

Local governments should adapt these guidelines to best suit their local needs. In addition, law enforcement personnel should consult response guidance issued by the Maryland State Police for specific information related to their duties.

**SUSPICIOUS PACKAGES AND LETTERS MAY BE IDENTIFIED BY SOME OF THE FOLLOWING CHARACTERISTICS:**

- Excessive Postage
- Handwritten or poorly typed addresses
- Incorrect titles
- Title, but no name
- Misspelling of common words
- Oily stains, discolorations or odor
- No return address
- Excessive weight
- Lopsided or uneven envelopes
- Protruding wires or aluminum foil
- Excessive amounts of packing materials such as tape, string, etc.
- Markings depicting an explosion, chemical or biological agent release
- Ticking or other unusual sounds
- Marked with restrictive endorsements, such as "Personal" and "Confidential"
- Postmarks that do not agree with the return address

**DO NOT PANIC** - Biological agents can cause infection in the skin, gastrointestinal system or the lungs. In order for this to occur, the organism must be rubbed into abraded skin, swallowed or inhaled as a fine, aerosolized mist. Disease can be prevented after exposure to the anthrax spores by early treatment with the appropriate antibiotics. Anthrax is not spread from one person to another.

## **ACTIONS TO BE TAKEN ON RECEIPT OF AN UNOPENED SUSPICIOUS LETTER OR PACKAGE**

1. A citizen's 911 call will be routed to fire communications. For an unopened package, the caller should be instructed to:
  - a. Do not shake or empty the contents of any suspicious envelope or package.
  - b. Place the envelope in a plastic zip lock bag or other type of clear container to prevent leakage of contents. The zip lock bag or clear container should then be placed inside a second zip lock bag or container if possible.
  - c. If they do not have a bag or container, cover the envelope or package with an article of clothing, paper or trashcan. Instruct the caller not to remove this cover.
  - d. Leave the room, close the door or section off the area to prevent others from entering. Leave the building and meet responders outside.
  - e. Wash hands with soap and water to prevent the spread of contaminants to the face.
  - f. Develop a list of anyone who was in the room or area when the suspicious letter or package was discovered. Give this list to the fire and law enforcement responders.
2. The Fire Department should respond **non-emergency** with a single engine company. Local law enforcement should dispatch a patrol car **non-emergency**. Local health department officials must also be notified.
3. When fire and law enforcement arrive at the location, they will interview the caller about the package and determine any actions taken by the caller prior to arrival.
  - a. If the caller has placed the letter/package in a container or bag, they will be asked to bring it to a police officer, sheriff's deputy or State Trooper. He or she will inspect the object while leaving it in the container and document the event. Law enforcement officials will take custody of the letter/package. Law enforcement officials will then transport the letter/package to their headquarters or barracks and deposit the package in a white 5-gallon bucket with lid.

b. If the caller was not able to bag the letter or package then the Fire Department will enter the building in protective clothing to secure the letter/package. The following protective clothing is recommended:

- Tyvek suit (does not need to be splash resistant)
- Latex gloves
- Rubber/latex shoe covers
- Air purifying respirator with HEPA or P100 filter cartridge
- Structural firefighter protective clothing and SCBA will also provide sufficient protection

*Personal protective clothing is purely precautionary and this environment is not considered to be immediately dangerous to life and health.*

The fire fighter will double bag the letter/package and remove it to the outside. The fire fighter will turn over the bagged letter/package to law enforcement officials.

4. Letters/packages will be stored in accordance with local law enforcement procedures. Law enforcement officials should contact the Maryland State Police and FBI for further guidance and disposition instructions. If the letter/package is not needed for further criminal investigation or prosecution, it may be safely disposed of in a standard trash receptacle.

## **ACTIONS TO BE TAKEN FOR AN OPENED SUSPICIOUS LETTER OR PACKAGE AND MATERIAL HAS SPILLED**

1. A citizen's 911 call will be routed to fire communications. For an opened package, the caller should be instructed to:
  - a. Do not try to clean up the powder. Carefully cover the spilled contents immediately with an article of clothing, paper or trashcan. Try to avoid creating air currents which may cause the substance to become airborne. Do not remove this cover.
  - b. Leave the room, close the door or section off the area to prevent others from entering. Leave the building and meet responders outside.
  - c. Wash hands with soap and water to prevent the spread of contaminants to the face.
  - d. Remove heavily contaminated clothing as soon as possible and place in a plastic bag or some other container that can be sealed. This clothing bag should be given to emergency responders for proper handling. If the individual is not at their home, the fire department will provide disposable clothing and will secure the contaminated clothing once the Hazmat team arrives.
  - e. Shower with soap and water as soon as possible. Do not use bleach or other disinfectant. If the individual is not at their home or a shower capability is not available, the fire department will provide a means of decontamination.
  - f. Develop a list of anyone who was in the room or area when the suspicious letter or package was discovered, especially those who had actual contact with the material. Give this list to the fire and law enforcement responders so that proper instructions can be given for medical follow-up and further investigation.
2. The fire department should dispatch a Hazmat box. If a local Hazmat team is not available, fire communications should request assistance from the Maryland Department of the Environment. Law enforcement will dispatch officers for investigation, traffic control and scene security. Local health department officials must also be notified.
3. When fire and law enforcement arrive at the location, they will interview the caller about the package and determine any actions taken by the caller prior to arrival. This may be done verbally or by phone. If communicating

verbally, remember to be upwind and at a sufficient reasonable distance that cross contamination is not likely.

4. On-scene engine companies will provide support to the Hazmat team.
5. The Hazmat team will ensure that the occupants of the affected area are identified. If self decon has not be performed, and is an option, it should be done immediately. If self decon is not a viable option, the Hazmat team will commence decon operations and collection of potentially contaminated clothing. The Hazmat team will provide decontaminated individuals with disposable clothing.
6. Potentially exposed personnel will be evaluated by a medic unit after decontamination for baseline patient assessment and documentation (MAIS sheet and Additional Narrative). Exposed personnel should be referred to see their physician for monitoring and/or treatment **IF law enforcement and Hazmat personnel determine that there is a credible threat of exposure based on the circumstances of the incident and on-scene characterization of the material.**

For cases where no credible threat is determined, those persons potentially exposed should be advised to seek medical attention **IF** they start to develop flu-like symptoms.

7. The Hazmat team will make a Level B or C entry (depending on available equipment). An Air Purifying Respirator with HEPA or P-100 filter will provide sufficient respiratory protection in this situation. The entry team will secure the agent by double bagging and placing in an appropriate container. The Hazmat entry team will photograph the letter/package prior to securing the agent. The entry team should clean up as much spilled agent as possible by placing it into double bags. The affected surface should be sprayed with a 0.5% bleach solution and allowed to stand for 10 minutes. The surface may then be wiped dry or rinsed as appropriate.
8. The Hazmat entry team will decon per their SOP.
9. Law enforcement officials at the scene will take custody of the contained letter/package. If law enforcement and Hazmat personnel determine that **there is a credible threat of exposure based on the circumstances of the incident and on-scene characterization of the material,** then a sample of the material should be forwarded to the DHMH Laboratory in Baltimore for further analysis.
10. Results from the state laboratory will be communicated to the local health department for notifications.

## **ACTIONS TO BE TAKEN IF A ROOM IS CONTAMINATED BY AN AEROSOL**

*(Examples: aerosol device is discharged, warning is received that the air handling system has been contaminated or warning is received that a biological or chemical agent has been released into a public space)*

1. A citizen's 911 call will be routed to fire communications. For an unopened package, the caller should be instructed to:
  - a. Turn off local fans or ventilation units.
  - b. Leave the area immediately.
  - c. Close the door or section off the area to prevent others from entering.
  - d. If available, notify the building security official or any available supervisor.
  - e. Shut down the air handling system in the building, if possible.
  - f. Remove heavily contaminated clothing as soon as possible and place in a plastic bag or some other container that can be sealed. This clothing bag should be given to emergency responders for proper handling. If the individual is not at their home, the fire department will provide disposable clothing and will secure the contaminated clothing once the Hazmat team arrives.
  - g. Shower with soap and water as soon as possible. Do not use bleach or other disinfectant. If the individual is not at their home or a shower capability is not available, the fire department will provide a means of decontamination.
  - h. Develop a list of anyone who was in the room or area when the suspicious letter or package was discovered, especially those who had actual contact with the material. Give this list to the fire and law enforcement responders so that proper instructions can be given for medical follow-up and further investigation.
2. The fire department should dispatch a Hazmat box. If a local Hazmat team is not available, fire communications should request assistance from the Maryland Department of the Environment. Law enforcement will dispatch officers for investigation, traffic control and scene security. Local health department officials must also be notified.

3. When fire and law enforcement arrive at the location, they will interview the caller about the package and determine any actions taken by the caller prior to arrival. This may be done verbally or by phone. If communicating verbally, remember to be upwind and at a sufficient reasonable distance that cross contamination is not likely.
4. On-scene engine companies will provide support to the Hazmat team.
5. The Hazmat team will ensure that the occupants of the affected area are identified. If self decon has not be performed, the Hazmat team will commence decon operations and collection of potentially contaminated clothing. The Hazmat team will provide decontaminated individuals with disposable clothing.
6. Potentially exposed personnel will be evaluated by a medic unit after decontamination for baseline patient assessment and documentation (MAIS sheet and Additional Narrative). Exposed personnel should be referred to see their physician for monitoring and/or treatment IF law enforcement and Hazmat personnel determine that there is a credible threat of exposure based on the circumstances of the incident and on-scene characterization of the material.

For cases where no credible threat is determined, those persons potentially exposed should be advised to seek medical attention **IF** they start to develop flu-like symptoms.

7. The Hazmat team will make a Level B or C entry (depending on available equipment). An Air Purifying Respirator with HEPA or P-100 filter will provide sufficient respiratory protection in this situation. The entry team will secure the agent (if possible) by double bagging and placing in an appropriate container. The Hazmat entry team will photograph the site and objects of interest as needed. The entry team should clean up as much spilled agent as possible by placing it into double bags. The affected surface should be sprayed with a 0.5% bleach solution and allowed to stand for 10 minutes. The surface may then be wiped dry or rinsed as appropriate.
8. The Hazmat entry team will decon per their SOP.
9. Law enforcement officials at the scene will take custody of the contained letter/package. If law enforcement and Hazmat personnel determine that there is a credible threat of exposure based on the circumstances of the incident and on-scene characterization of the material, then a sample of the material should be forwarded to the DHMH Laboratory in Baltimore for further analysis.

10. Results from the state laboratory will be communicated to the local health department for notifications.

## **ACTIONS TO BE TAKEN AT POTENTIAL EXPLOSIVES INCIDENTS**

1. Law enforcement will dispatch an officer(s)
  - a. Officers shall establish a 300 foot perimeter (Car and truck bombs require larger distances (500-1500 feet))
  - b. Officers shall detain persons who were in the vicinity of the event.
  - c. Officers will establish an area of safe refuge, and relocate everyone involved to that area for interviews.
  - d. Officers shall not enter potentially hazardous areas.
  - e. Officers shall establish and control perimeters.
  - f. Officers shall initiate crime scene policies and procedures.
2. Law enforcement will notify the local bomb squad or the State Fire Marshal's Office for all incidents.
3. Due consideration must be given to the possibility of secondary devices.
4. Law enforcement will notify the county office of emergency management.
5. Upon request, local fire communications will dispatch an engine company, medic unit and hazardous materials team (if available).
6. The engine company shall establish contact with the ranking police officer, and establish a unified command.
7. The engine company is to ensure evacuation has been completed, and to coordinate protection of the bomb technician. The HazMat team and medic unit are to assist the bomb technician.
8. All of these events are potential crimes and the scenes are crime scenes. Chain of custody and evidence rules apply.

## **DISPATCHER QUESTIONS FOR CALLS FOR SUSPICIOUS LETTERS**

1. Do you know who the letter is from?
2. Have you had any threats from anyone?
3. Do you see anything inside or outside the envelope – (i.e. Powder or wires)?
4. Is anyone experiencing any medical problems?

***If the answer to all the above questions are NO, advise the caller to throw the letter away.***

***ADVISE THE CALLER: DO NOT CUT OR TEAR THE ENVELOPE***