



**Guidance for First Responders (911, EMS, EMA Personnel, Law Enforcement, Fire Fighters, Others): Dealing with Suspicious Letters, Packages, and Unknown Substances**  
**Georgia Department of Public Health**  
**MAY 11, 2017**

**I. Suspicious substances, letters, or packages**

***NOTE: All suspicious packages should always be cleared of explosive hazards prior to any other action! Suspicious substances and unknown powders should be screened for explosives hazards.***

The threat posed by reports of suspicious letters, packages, and unknown substances ranges from none to credible, and no set of guidelines can cover every possible variation. Every incident will have unique features and the responder must use his or her own judgment in applying these guidelines. The Federal Bureau of Investigation and the Georgia, Department of Public Health maintains specialized assets and expertise to assist responders to quickly, efficiently and safely resolve such incidents. Responders can obtain such assistance and guidance by contacting the FBI's Weapons of Mass Destruction Coordinator (WMDC) at (404) 679-9000 (24hrs.). First responders, responding to such incidents, should always notify the WMDC as early in the incident as is operationally possible.

It is important to assess each of these situations for the possibility of exposure to a biological agent. While many jurisdictions and departments now have the capability to perform limited field identification of unknown materials, there is NO CURRENTLY FIELDED technologies that can 100% accurately determine if a biological agent is present in the material. Only a Centers for Disease Control (CDC) certified Laboratory Response Network (LRN) facility could accurately screen for biological threat agents. Responders must assess the totality of the circumstances surrounding the incident. Note: If during the process of field screening, the responders believe there is a credible threat or the presence of a biological agent, NO FURTHER FIELD IDENTIFICATION SHOULD BE ATTEMPTED until the FBI WMDC is contacted.

Letters or packages that do not meet the criteria for credible threats (Section A. below) are highly unlikely to contain biological materials and **may** not require screening at an approved LRN facility. Persons coming into contact with a substance/letter/package that is not a credible threat, per Section A. below, should **(1)** clean up area and discard substance/letter/package per Section B.2. Below as appropriate and **(2)** wash their hands and/or exposed skin with soap and water. If the substance has visibly contaminated a person's clothing, the clothing should be removed and laundered with usual cleaning methods appropriate for the clothing affected.

**A. Determining Threat Credibility:** Any of the following circumstances ***may*** indicate a credible threat. Local law enforcement and the FBI on Duty WMD Coordinator **must be notified** (404) 679-9000 (24/7) PRIOR to any actions taken to collect/manipulate and/or analyze the substance/material: FBI Coordinator can assist local authorities in establishing credible threat. (Appendix A).

- ⌚ A letter/package (either opened or unopened) with material present. For example, it could be covered with powder, or have a substance staining the letter or leaking from it.
- ⌚ Persons exposed to a suspicious substance/letter/package suddenly becomes ill. (Note Biological agents often take hours to weeks to manifest symptoms. Chem agents can have an effect after only a few seconds to minutes)
- ⌚ A threat accompanies the letter or package (substance not present).
- ⌚ A suspicious substance with threat.
- ⌚ The intended target is potentially vulnerable or is of strategic significance.

**B. If the FBI WMDC concurs that a credible biological threat exists, Properly** trained responders will make all attempts at sampling, do not attempt any further field identification and/or analysis without contacting WMD Agent. The material must be tested at an LRN facility. Prior to packaging the material for submission to the LRN facility, a qualified Hazardous Materials Technician must accomplish field screening. Hazardous Materials Technicians should be trained to the most current NFPA 472 6.5 competencies for evidence preservation and sampling. Crime scene procedures shall be put in place once the threat determination is made. If operationally feasible, the material and packaging should be photographed and/or vital investigative information recorded: The minimum field screening steps and recorded information requirements are:

As per the coordinated FBI-DHS-HHS/DHS guidelines the material must be:

- ⌚ Cleared and screened of explosive hazards.
- ⌚ Cleared of radiation hazards (Alpha, Beta and Gamma).
- ⌚ Cleared Corrosive hazards
- ⌚ Cleared for flammability hazards
- ⌚ Cleared for Volatile Organic Compounds (VOCs)

If operationally feasible, the material and packaging should be photographed and/or vital investigative information recorded:

- ⌚ Photographed front and back with an item to identify scale such as a ruler
- ⌚ Sender
- ⌚ Addressee
- ⌚ Physical description
- ⌚ Postmarks

**NOTE: Even if a credible biological threat does not exist, there may be a threat posed by other radiological, chemical and/or nuclear materials. These incidents must be coordinated on a case-by-case basis with the FBI WMDC. In addition, the mere threat of the use of a WMD is a violation of federal law and will be vigorously pursued and prosecuted by the FBI. Always contact the FBI WMDC to ensure there are no additional legal implications, even in situations where the on scene commander determines there is no threat from an actual WMD agent.**

**1. If the FBI accepts the situation as a credible threat, follow the steps below.**

- ⌚ **Notify District Public Health**
- ⌚ **Notify Local EMA**
- ⌚ **Notify the State Public Health Office**

- 1-866-PUB-HLTH

- ⌚ ***NOTE: HazMat personnel (if a substance is present) or law enforcement personnel (if a substance is NOT present) required to handle any substance/letter/package should follow the guidance below (B.1.a. (Respiratory Protection Information); B.1.b. (Laboratory Testing); and B.1.c. (Packaging/Transport Protocol) based upon the anticipated level of exposure risk associated with the response situation.***

## **A. Personal Protective Equipment**

- ⌚ The basic purpose of respiratory protection is to protect an individual from inhalation of hazards (chemical, biological, etc.). Respirators provide protection either by removing contaminants from the air before it is inhaled (air purifying) or by supplying an independent source of respirable air (air supplying). Worn IAW OSHA 29 CFR1910.120
- ⌚ Respirators providing protection against inhalation of **biological** organisms (in relative order of protection ranging from air purifying to air supplying) include disposable quarter-masks, half-mask respirators, full-face piece respirators, powered air-purifying respirators (PAPR), air-supplied respirators, and self-contained breathing apparatus (SCBA). Among NIOSH-approved air-purifying respirators, there are three categories of filter (N, R, and P) type based on resistance to oil. All will filter particles 0.3 microns or larger, but at various levels of filter efficiency (95%, 99%, and 99.97%). For example, in the hospital setting, disposable N95 masks are used to protect healthcare workers against hazards such as pulmonary tuberculosis (95% efficient), and P100 respirators are used for hazards such as Hantavirus (99.97% efficient).
- ⌚ Current data suggest that the SCBA, which first responders currently use for entry into potentially hazardous atmospheres, will provide responders with respiratory protection against biological exposures associated with a suspected act of biological terrorism. Protective clothing, including gloves and booties, also may be required for the response to a suspected act of biological terrorism.
- ⌚ All personnel should follow their department SOP in regards to handling and working around Hazardous substances.
- ⌚ In addition, **prompt** laboratory testing of suspicious letters, packages, or substances provides responders with rapid information about exposure risk such that appropriate prophylactic treatment can be offered.

## **B. Packaging**

- ⌚ Prior to transport, coordinate with the FBI duty WMD Coordinator at (404) 679-9000.
- ⌚ Prior to transport, coordinate with the GDPH CBRNE Coordinator at **404-764-9524**. This is the contact who will actually coordinate the delivery to the Public Health Lab. If not available coordinate through 1-866-PUB-HLTH

- ⌚ An initial response to a biological agent should follow the operational guidance of ASTM E2770-10.
- ⌚ Transporting personnel do not need to wear personal protective equipment for transport of properly packaged, decontaminated containers because they are safe to handle.
- ⌚ If bulk powder and/or a letter/package is present, the suspicious material should be collected as per ASTM E2458-1 Care should be taken to minimize aerosolization during this process. All bulk powder and associated material should be collected for submission.
- ⌚ If only trace contamination is suspected, collect as per the CDC's Surface Sampling Procedures. Link to instructions is listed in references.
- ⌚ If multiple items appear to be contaminated, separate samples should be collected and the location of each recorded. Consult with the FBI WMDC and the Georgia Public Health Laboratory to determine how to package the samples.
- ⌚ Packaged Samples should be decontaminated with your standard decon solution (i.e. bleach or peroxide) and placed into a rigid or hard sided container such as a paint can or cooler for transport. Care should be taken to minimize the size of the container.
- ⌚ Sworn Law enforcement personnel or designated Georgia Department of Public Health Official should **immediately** transport the specimens (along with Case # form and Custody form) to the Georgia Public Health Laboratory (GPHL) 1749 Clairmont Rd, Decatur, GA 30033 according to appropriate "chain-of-custody" protocols. Prior to transport, phone the GDPH CBRNE Coordinator at **404-674-9524** or 1-866-PUB-HLTH.
- ⌚ Persons with exposure to the substance should decon their hands and/or exposed skin with soap and water. If the substance has visibly contaminated a person's clothing, the clothing should be removed and laundered with decon methods appropriate to the agent and clothing affected.

### **C. Transport Protocol**

- ⌚ Prior to transport, coordinate with the FBI WMDC at (404) 679-9000.
- ⌚ Prior to transport, coordinate with the GDPH CBRNE Coordinator at **404-764-9524**. Alternate # is 1-866-PUB-HLTH
- ⌚ An initial response to a biological agent should follow the operational guidance of ASTM E2770-10.
- ⌚ If bulk powder and/or a letter/package is present, the suspicious material should be collected as per ASTM E2458-1 Care should be taken to minimize aerosolization during this process. All bulk powder and associated material should be collected for submission.

### **D. Laboratory Testing**

Analysis conducted at a LRN facility is strictly to screen for the presence or absence of high threat biological agents in the substance/material in question. Preliminary results are generally available within 6-8 hours of submission

**Note: All submissions must have an FBI case # by this point.**

**Note: Suspected biological material will not go to the GBI Crime Lab.**

**Note: The LRN facility WILL NOT identify the substance/material only rule out the presence of specific biological agents.**

- ⌚ **Do not smell, touch, taste, look closely at, or shake the substance.** Care should be taken when bagging letters and packages to minimize creating a puff of air that could spread pathogens. It is best to avoid large bags and to work very slowly and carefully when placing objects in bags.
- ⌚ Care should be taken not to use up all of the material during field screening.
- ⌚ For credible biological threats, **substances** in letters/packages can be submitted for testing at the Georgia Public Health Laboratory (GPHL) according to the **Packaging/Transport** protocol below. Competent, **trained** and properly equipped personnel, including HazMat teams, should appropriately prepare the letter/package for transport.
  - 1.) Secure sample in an approved container
  - 2.) Over pack sample container. (I.E. evidence collection canister or tupperware container)
  - 3.) Secure over pack container in a 4 sides hard case (I.E. Pelican case or Igloo cooler)
- ⌚ An FBI tracking number will be required for all specimens submitted to Georgia Public Health Laboratory for testing. This tracking number indicates to the GPHL that threat assessment and hazard assessment as per the coordinated FBI-DHS-HHS/DHS guidelines.
- ⌚ Ensure that all persons with possible exposure to the substance remain on site until emergency personnel arrive; list all persons (with contact information) who physically handled the substance and provide the list to authorities.
- ⌚ Decisions about the need for initiation of antibiotic prophylaxis for individuals in contact with the substances should be made in consultation with public health officials. In most circumstances, the decision to begin prophylaxis can be delayed until the presence or absence of a biologic threat can be determined.

**2. If the Law Enforcement DOES NOT accept the situation as a credible threat, follow the steps below.**

- a. **Low risk.** (low-profile, low-risk target with no threat, e.g., powder in stairwell with no threat, powder on mall floor with no threat). **Whether or not the assessment should be conducted at the scene can be decided on a case-by-case basis at the discretion of the law enforcement personnel.**
  - ⌚ Clean and disinfect with a bleach solution (one part household bleach to 10 parts water) using your organizations minimal level of protective gear.
  - ⌚ Place in plastic bag and discard as routine trash.
- b. **Very low risk.** If the risk is judged to be **very low** (obvious explanation, e.g., Laundromat with powder on the floor, restaurant with powder on a counter), **the assessment does not need to be conducted at the scene.**
  - ⌚ Clean like a routine household spill.

## II. Other Resources:

- 🕒 Georgia Department of Public Health Event Information Line, operated by the Georgia Poison Center, at **1-866-752-3442** (toll-free, 24 hours/day, 7 days/week)—has recorded information.
- 🕒 GDPH Chemical Biological Radiological Nuclear (CBRN) Coordinator **(404) 764-9524**
- 🕒 FBI Weapons of Mass Destruction Coordinator **(404) 679-9000**
- 🕒 4<sup>TH</sup> Weapons of Mass Destruction Civil Support Team (CST) **(678) 569-3706**
- 🕒 Georgia Emergency Management Agency **1-800-TRY-GEMA**
- 🕒 Public Health Lab 24hr # **(404) 655-3695**, Main # **(404) 327-7900**, Dr. Pai (EP Dir.) **(404) 558-0667**

### III .Appendix Appendix A

#### Identifying Suspicious Packages

**Suspicious packages should be risk assessed for articulated threats. Examples would include:**

- Actual threat message in or on the package
- Addressee in position of authority, e.g., government employee, political figure, private sector executive
- Addressee in controversial business, e.g., chemical industry, forestry

#### **What kind of packages should be considered suspicious?**

*Some characteristics of suspicious packages and envelopes include the following:*

Inappropriate or unusual labeling

- Excessive postage
- Handwritten or poorly typed addresses
- Misspellings of common words - Strange return address or no return address
- Incorrect titles or title without a name
- Not addressed to a specific person
- Marked with restrictions, e.g. "Personal," "Confidential" or "Do not x-ray"
- Marked with any threatening language
- Postmarked from a city or state that does not match the return address

Appearance

- Powdery substance felt through or appearing on the package
- Oily stains, discolorations or odor
- Lopsided or uneven envelope
- Excessive packaging material such as masking tape, string, etc.

Other suspicious signs

- Excessive weight
- Ticking sound
- Protruding wires or aluminum foil

If a package or envelope appears suspicious, **NON-EMERGENCY PERSONNEL SHOULD NOT OPEN OUR TOUCH IT.** Emergency personnel should limit direct contact with the package. Ideally, only those with hazardous material training should proceed to handle the package, when cleared by a certified bomb technician and is deemed necessary.

#### **IV. Definitions**

**Definition of a biological threat:** Any biological material capable of causing: death, disease, or other biological malfunction in a human, an animal, a plant, or another living organism; deterioration of food, water, equipment, supplies or material of any kind; or harmful alteration of the environment. Also, an expression of intention to use any such material for such purposes.

**Definition of emergency service:** The industry comprised of fire, law enforcement and emergency medical service providers who respond to an emergency; includes emergency management.

**Definition of a first responder:** An emergency worker who responds to an incident within a set amount of time. The term is usually specific to fire, law enforcement and EMS' immediately arriving assets. Those arriving on scene at later intervals may be called a responder, an emergency responder, a secondary responder, a subject matter expert or a special law enforcement assignment.

**Definition of a hazmat responder:** A trained and certified individual who is a member of a hazardous



material response team and qualified to respond to incidents involving toxic industrial chemical, chemical warfare agents and other weapons of mass destruction. A hazmat response specialist will have additional training to respond to specific weapons of mass destruction.

**Definition of a package:** A letter, box, jar, suitcase or any other container that may hold a suspect material.

**Definition of Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD):** WMDs may be any nuclear, biological, incendiary, chemical, explosive or radiological weapon that may be used for death or destruction.

## V. References

- ⌚ Recommendations for the Selection and Use of Respirators and Protective Clothing for Protection Against Biological Agents. NIOSH. April 2009 accessed April 9, 2009 at <http://www.cdc.gov/niosh/docs/2009-132/>
- ⌚ International Association of Fire Chiefs. Model Procedures for Responding to a Package with Suspicion of a Biological Threat: October 2008 <https://www.iafc.org/topics-and-tools/resources/resource/model-procedures-for-responding-to-a-package-with-suspicion-of-a-biological-threat>
- ⌚ NFPA 472 Standard for competence of Responders to hazardous materials/Weapons of Mass Destruction Incidents 2008 Edition
- ⌚ Guidance on Initial Responses to a Suspicious Letter / Container with a Potential Biological Threat - FBI – DHS – HHS/CDC Coordinated Document: November 2004  
<https://emergency.cdc.gov/planning/pdf/suspicious-package-biothreat.pdf>
- ⌚ ASTM Standard E2458 - 10 “Standard Practices for Bulk Sample Collection and Swab Sample Collection of Visible Powders Suspected of Being Biological Agents from Nonporous Surfaces” ASTM International, West Conshohocken, PA, 2003, DOI: 10.1520/C0033-03, [www.astm.org](http://www.astm.org).
- ⌚ ASTM Standard E2770-17 Standard Guide for Operational Guidelines for Initial Response to a Suspected Biothreat Agent. <https://www.astm.org/Standards/E2770.htm>
- ⌚ CDC Surface sampling procedures for *Bacillus anthracis* spores from smooth, non-porous surfaces: April, 26 2012  
<https://www.cdc.gov/niosh/topics/emres/surface-sampling-bacillus-anthraxis.html>
- ⌚ B2C Kit Instructions, Quicksilver Analytics, Abingdon, MD. (GDPH) does not endorse any specific vendor)



## VI. Example of Packaging

