

University mail system proceeds as usual despite threats

■ Campus mail handlers have already been trained to deal with suspicious letters

By Marty Toohey
for the Emerald

In light of recent high-profile anthrax incidents, the University mail system is following federal and state safety guidelines but not changing day-to-day procedures, according to Joan Saylor, a Department of Public Safety administrative lieutenant.

The University's Mail Services Department sorts most University

mail at a central receiving area. Sorters and carriers were trained in suspicious package recognition before the anthrax incidents, and things are not much different for them now, according to Mail Services Coordinator Diane Longworth.

"We're doing the same things we always have, except watching a little closer," Longworth said. "We wash our hands a little more often, we have (masks and gloves) available to carriers, but we leave that up to individual carriers."

The FBI has not recommend wearing gloves or masks, but strongly advises mail carriers or

anyone sorting their mail to wash their hands frequently.

If any packages seem suspicious, DPS should be contacted, according to Saylor. DPS will respond with two officers whenever possible, with one officer going to the affected area, while the other officer will talk to others in the area to determine if anyone has handled the item in question, according to the DPS Web site.

"We're telling people to be mindful when they open their mail," Saylor said. "There have been no specific threats toward Oregon or the University, and we don't want

to make people's lives more fearful than they need to be. If you receive suspicious mail, put it down, don't handle it, call DPS and we will respond quickly."

Once DPS officers assess a situation, they will determine whether to notify Environmental Health and Safety, the Eugene Police Department or FBI. If there is a risk of chemical or biological contaminants, such as anthrax, DPS will clear the area and shut off all vents, and EHS will be called in, according to EHS Director Kay Coots.

After working with law enforcement to ensure crime scene evi-

dence is not damaged, EHS workers will enter the area, wearing any protective gear deemed necessary. In the case of anthrax, workers wear respirators and skin-and-eye coverings.

Coots and Saylor said much of their departments' responses are formed on a case-by-case basis.

"A package that smells funny and doesn't have a return address is a lot different than a normal envelope going to an international studies office that normally receives international mail," Saylor said.

Marty Toohey is a freelance reporter for the Oregon Daily Emerald.

Anthrax

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see much of a chance for an anthrax outbreak in Oregon, yet EPD and Lane County Sheriff's offices continue to receive calls from worried citizens throughout the state.

"There is no information to suggest there are any targets in Oregon," FBI agent Mike Morrow said.

Though the outbreaks of the acute infectious disease can no longer be viewed as isolated incidents, the low number of occurrences should not be cause for the nation to panic, officials said.

"We're fielding hundreds of calls a day," said Dr. Ann Thomas, a medical epidemiologist for Oregon Health Division. "We've tested suspicious substances, and nothing in Oregon has turned out to be positive."

It's not even uncommon to see

some kind of powder in the mail, Thomas said. Some magazine publishers will mail their magazines with a talc powder or corn starch to preserve the glossy-look of a magazine, she said.

The Eugene Police Department responded to a wave of calls by asking Eugene citizens to stay calm after the first anthrax outbreak in Florida.

"Our communication center was overwhelmed," said Eugene Police Department Spokeswoman Pam Alejandre. "We had people calling wondering if their flour was actually anthrax."

Lane County Sheriff Jan Clements said his office received a report from a woman worried about dust on her car. The substance turned out to be pollen.

Clements held a press conference last week to reassure Lane County

that it has the means to deal with an anthrax attack if one should occur.

"I'm trying to calm people in the community and give cause for minimizing their fear," Clements said. "We need to really put things in perspective. Five thousand people die from food poisoning each year and thousands from car accidents, but that doesn't keep people from driving cars."

He said he does recognize, however, that the American people have discovered a new scare that needs to be addressed.

Lane County, he said, is well equipped to handle most emergency cases within the county on its own. However, when handling certain situations is beyond the county's capabilities, the state and national government will be asked to intervene.

"If anthrax was found, we would be working directly with the FBI,

the Oregon Emergency Management and the Federal Emergency Management Agency — everybody would be working together to deal with the problem," Clements said. "We're positioned to coordinate an effective public response."

Rob Rockstroh, the director of Lane County Health and Human Services, said the county is also well equipped to handle a communicable disease outbreak.

"We once had an outbreak of Hepatitis A and had 1,200 people lined up for shots," he said. "We're very used to dealing with communicable disease reporting."

Botello, a University senior living on the East Coast, returned to work for Sen. Gordon Smith on Wednesday.

Smith's office is located in the Russell building, the only Senate office building that has reopened. Two of the House office buildings — the Rayburn and Cannon build-

ings — reopened last week.

So far, no mail is being circulated through the open Senate and House office buildings, though inside mail will resume circulation tomorrow, Botello said. She has also seen an intense increase in security, something she said should have been in place from the beginning.

"There are Capitol police everywhere; dogs are used to sniff out cars that park near the Capitol, mirrors are being used under the cars," Botello said. "Security should have been this tight to begin with."

She said she's not scared anymore. In fact, she and Ali Burket, also a University student interning for Smith, discussed coming back to Oregon and changed their minds.

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Clinic

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states and the District of Columbia, Eugene Planned Parenthood spokeswoman Kitty Piercy said. The envelopes — which have preprinted return addresses from the U.S. Marshals Service or the Secret Service — contain unidentified powdery substances and threatening letters, she said.

So far, all substances have tested negative.

"For them to do this at a time when we should all be working together against terrorism is really reprehensible," Piercy said.

Although U.S. Attorney General John Ashcroft has condemned an-

thrax hoaxes and promised the prosecution of guilty parties, Planned Parenthood leaders have expressed some skepticism. Piercy, who is a former Oregon state representative, said clinics never got an adequate response from government officials in the past.

"We have been experiencing domestic terrorism for quite a long time," Piercy said. "We believe the public should demand the country respond as strongly to domestic terrorism as national terrorism."

Portland FBI Spokeswoman Beth Anne Steele said she could not discuss the details of the investigation. But she said the department had information that abortion clinics could be potential targets of anthrax threats.

"The FBI did warn abortion clinics all over the country when the threat was first realized," she said. "A warning went out to clinics to be on the alert for anything suspicious."

She added that the FBI did not prosecute anyone for sending anthrax threats to abortion clinics in the past.

At least 132 National Abortion Federation affiliates have also received the mail. Because membership in NAF and Planned Parenthood doesn't completely overlap, representatives believe more than 200 clinics were targeted.

Many of the messages are signed by "the Army of God," a radical Christian anti-abortion group that has taken credit for several clinic bombings and murders of abortion

doctors. The letters include statements such as "You've been exposed to anthrax. We will kill you all."

Although states on the west coast have received such mail in the past, none have gotten anthrax threats after Sept. 11. But Portland Planned Parenthood representative Don Skinner said after the "rash" of anthrax mail in 1998 and 1999, all clinics have developed a protocol for responding to suspicious deliveries.

"We're being vigilant about what comes in," he said. "(The Army of God members) are people who have embraced violence as a means for achieving their end."

Last week, the Army of God spokesman, Rev. Donald Spitz of Chesapeake, Va., told the L.A.

Times that the flood of threatening mail to clinics is a "good thing" and a "brilliant move."

But Spitz denied knowing where the mail is coming from.

Piercy said the Eugene Planned Parenthood office has never received anthrax threats but is being cautious. She added that the threats will not stop clinics from doing their work.

"The best way to fight this is to not let it keep us from going to work and providing the kind of health care women in this community and all over the country need," she said.

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