01-014 Handling Suspicious Packages/Letters Re: Biological Hazard

Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department

FIELD OPERATIONS DIRECTIVE

Field Operations Support Services

HANDLING SUSPICIOUS PACKAGES/LETTERS RE: BIOLOGICAL HAZARD

PURPOSE

Numerous years after the Anthrax incidents, patrol personnel continue to respond to incidents involving suspicious powders being sent through the mail. Although not related to terrorism, these powders are generally sent intentionally and, as such, constitute both federal and state crimes with or without a written threat accompanying them.

This directive focuses on procedures for handling suspicious powder letters/packages of a potential biohazard nature and not incidents of suspected explosive devices.

Refer to Manual of Policy and Procedures, section 5-06/080.15, Patrol Unit's Responsibilities – Notifications – Safety Precautions, when dealing with suspected explosive device situations. **It should be noted that an improvised explosive device can be hidden in something as small as a greeting card envelope. Do not assume you are dealing with a suspicious powder just because the informant used the term anthrax when they reported the incident.**

Additionally, this directive does not address traditional hazardous materials incidents (refer to Emergency Operations Procedures 2-4, Hazardous Materials Incidents) or weapons of mass destruction (WMD) incidents involving victims with signs and symptoms (refer to Field Operations Directive 05-05, Weapons of Mass Destruction Guidelines and Emergency Operations Procedures 4-3, Weapons of Mass Destruction). **In all incidents where victims exhibit signs or complain of symptoms of exposure, the Fire Department must be requested immediately.**

Indicators of Suspicious Letters/Packages

One or more of the following characteristics may not be indicative of an actual threat, however, these indicators should be used in conjunction with the totality of the circumstances to assess the viability of the threat. Some characteristics of suspicious letters/packages may include, but are not limited to, the following:

- Excessive postage
- Handwritten or poorly typed address
- Incorrect titles
- Misspellings of common words
- Presence of residue powder or granular substance

- No return address
- Excessive weight
- Lopsided or uneven envelope
- Content makes noise when tipped like sand inside
- Excessive security material (i.e., masking tape, string, etc.)
- Return address fake or unfamiliar to addressee
- Marked with restrictive endorsements (i.e., “Personal,” “Confidential”)
- City or state in postmark does not match return address

Keep in mind that these characteristics historically indicate the presence of an explosive device in which case the Arson Explosives Detail should be requested. If the letter/package has already been opened revealing a suspicious powder, follow the policy below.

POLICY

When a patrol unit is assigned to handle a call involving a suspicious letter/package, the following procedures should be utilized. Under no circumstances should patrol personnel handle the letter/package.

If a letter/package is unopened and determined to be suspicious, do not open it. Notify the Arson Explosives Detail to conduct a threat assessment. If necessary, the Arson Explosives Detail will contact HazMat Detail to bring the incident to conclusion.

Suspicious Powder Letter and/or Threatening Letter

If a package or letter has been opened and contains a written biohazard threat **and/or** a suspicious powder or material, notify the HazMat Detail. Do not reopen any suspicious item. The HazMat Detail will notify the FBI and conduct a threat assessment, respond, conduct public safety testing, and collect the evidence. The lack of a written threat does not mean that a crime has not been committed or that the material is not hazardous. A biological agent can be present even if it is not visible.

Evacuate and contain the area, isolating the suspicious package or letter. Depending on the size of the building, a floor or specific section of a floor (i.e., the mail room) may be all that is necessary to evacuate. If unsure, evacuate the entire building. In all circumstances, the HVAC system should be immediately turned off. The handling unit should write an Incident Report (SH-R-49) utilizing a WMD statistical code of 154 and one or more of the Penal Code or United States Code sections listed in Appendix A – Weapons of Mass Destruction Federal and State Laws.

Suspicious Material

If a suspicious material is reported, but has not been mailed or delivered to the location, contact the HazMat Detail to conduct a joint threat assessment. If deemed a crime or potentially hazardous, the HazMat Detail will respond. If so, evacuate and contain the area, isolating the suspicious package or letter. Depending on the size of the building, a floor or specific section of a floor (i.e., the mail room) may be all that is necessary to evacuate. If unsure, evacuate the entire building. In all circumstances, the HVAC system should be immediately turned off. If the incident is determined not to be a threat, HazMat Detail personnel

will assist the handling deputy in determining the best method to conclude the incident.

Telephonic Biohazard Threat

If a telephonic biological threat has been reported, it should be handled in a similar method as a telephonic bomb threat:

Determine and Document:

- Source of the call (i.e., 911, cell phone, direct dial) – exact wording of threat
- Exact wording of what was said
- Prior warning or post release (going to occur or has already occurred?)
- Exact location
- Agent dispersed
- Method of dispersal
- Quantity dispersed

The handling unit should respond to the location and contact the manager/owner or head of security. Any information regarding the incident should be obtained (i.e., disturbance with customer, disgruntled employee, etc.). If the handling unit feels the threat is legitimate, contact the HazMat Detail to conduct a joint threat assessment. Otherwise:

- Conduct a visual search for anything suspicious (i.e., suspect package, dispersal device, etc.)
- Assist manager in limiting potentially exposed persons
- If 911 call is from a nearby payphone, secure phone and request prints

If a suspicious package is located, follow the same procedures as above under Suspicious Material. If a threat is determined to not be credible, the handling unit should write an Incident Report (SH-R-49) utilizing a WMD statistical code of 154 and Penal Code section 11418.5(a), WMD Threats.

The HazMat Detail can be contacted 24/7 via the Special Enforcement Bureau at

[REDACTED TEXT] For routine questions, the HazMat Detail main office number is [REDACTED TEXT]

APPENDIX A

WEAPONS OF MASS DESTRUCTION FEDERAL AND STATE LAWS

United States Code Sections

Title 18, USC §175 Biological Weapons Anti-Terrorism Statute

Title 18, USC §229 Chemical Weapons Convention Implementation Act Title 18, USC §831 Prohibited Transactions Involving Nuclear Weapons Title 42, USC §842(p) Teaching WMD

Title 18, USC §876 Mailing Threatening Communications Title 18, USC §1038 False Information and Hoaxes

Title 18, USC §2332a Use of WMD (Bio) Penal Code Sections (Abridged)

375. (a) – It shall be unlawful to throw, drop, pour, deposit, release, discharge or expose, or to attempt to throw, drop, pour, deposit, release, discharge or expose in, upon or about any theater, restaurant, place of business, place of amusement or any place of public assemblage, any liquid, gaseous or solid substance or matter of any kind which is injurious to person or property, or is nauseous, sickening, irritating or offensive to any of the senses.

b. It shall be unlawful to manufacture or prepare, or to possess any liquid, gaseous, or solid substance or matter of any kind which is injurious to person or property, or is nauseous, sickening, irritating or offensive to any of the senses with intent to throw, drop, pour, deposit, release, discharge or expose the same in, upon or about any theater, restaurant, place of business, place of amusement, or any other place of public assemblage.
c. Any person violating any of the provisions hereof shall be punished by imprisonment in the county jail for not less than three months and not more than one year, or by a fine of not less than five hundred dollars ($500) and not more than two thousand dollars ($2,000), or by both such fine and imprisonment.
d. Any person who, in violating any of the provisions of subdivision (a), willfully employs or uses any liquid, gaseous or solid substance which may produce serious illness or permanent injury through being vaporized or otherwise dispersed in the air or who, in violating any of the provisions of subdivision (a), willfully employs or uses any tear gas, mustard gas or any of the combinations or compounds thereof, or willfully employs or uses acid or explosives, shall be guilty of a felony and shall be punished by imprisonment in the state prison.

11418. (a) Any person who possesses, develops, manufactures, produces, transfers, acquires, or retains any WMD.

(b)(1) – Any person who uses against another person a WMD.

(b)(2) – Any person who uses a WMD in a form that may cause widespread damage to and disruption of the water or food supply.

(b)(3) – Any person who maliciously uses against animals or crops a WMD.

(c) – Any person who uses a WMD in a form that may cause widespread and significant damage to public natural resources, including coastal waterways and beaches, public parkland, surface waters, ground water, and wildlife.

11418.1 Any person who gives, mails, sends, or causes to be sent any false or facsimile of a WMD to another person, or places, causes to be placed, or possesses any false or facsimile of a WMD, with the intent to cause another person to fear for his or her own safety, or for the personal safety of others, is guilty of a misdemeanor. It is a felony if the person's conduct causes another person to be placed in sustained fear. For purposes of this section, "sustained fear" has the same meaning as in section 11418.5.

11418.5. (a) – Any person who knowingly threatens to use a WMD.

11419. (a) – Any person possessing any of the restricted biological agents.