



United States Senate Committee on Governmental Affairs

Senator Joseph I. Lieberman

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LIEBERMAN SEEKS INVESTIGATION OF RICIN RESPONSE Why did USPS Delay Health Monitoring, Closure of Facility?

WASHINGTON - Governmental Affairs Committee Ranking Member Joe Lieberman, D-Conn., Friday asked for an investigation into troubling Postal Service and law enforcement delays in responding to the discovery of a letter containing the poison ricin at a Greenville, S.C., postal facility.

Lieberman said he would ask the General Accounting Office to determine why no concerted effort to monitor postal employees' health was made immediately after the envelope, containing the word "ricin" on it, was discovered; why the envelope was not immediately transferred to the Centers for Disease Control for testing; and why the facility was not tested for contamination until a week after the suspicious package was discovered.

"Have we learned nothing from the anthrax attacks of two years ago?" Lieberman asked. "By now, it should be second nature for the Postal Service to protect the health of its employees and for law enforcement and public health agencies to move as quickly as possible to identify the threat and take prompt and appropriate action."

The GAO is currently analyzing, at Lieberman's request, the handling of the anthrax attacks at all affected postal facilities. Lieberman said he would ask GAO to expand its investigation to include a look at the circumstances surrounding the Greenville ricin incident.

Based on a briefing of Committee staff by the Department of Homeland Security, Lieberman said that postal officials did not call on the FBI until 12 hours after the ricin envelope was discovered on October 15. The FBI took the package to the state crime lab. The crime lab passed it onto the South Carolina Department of Health, which, with the CDC's help, tried unsuccessfully to test the contents of the package. The package was then left at the health department over the weekend. On Monday, the health department FedExed the package to the CDC. The CDC received the package the morning of Oct. 21 and determined by that afternoon that the contents, indeed, were ricin. It took another 24 hours before the postal facility was closed.

"I want to know if appropriate action was taken to safeguard employees who were potentially exposed to this deadly chemical," Lieberman said. "The public and postal workers have a right to know why it took a full week for the Postal Service to monitor the health of its employees and to test the facility for possible contamination, and why it took law enforcers and public health officials so long to identify the nature of the threat."

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