

Postal Union: Officials Downplayed Risk

By Martin C. Evans

STAFF WRITER

New York postal union leaders have accused the Postal Service of failing to tell workers about the potential of exposure to anthrax in the mail.

The accusation came one week after police recovered an anthrax-tainted envelope that had passed through several mail handling facilities in Manhattan before being delivered to the Rockefeller Center office of NBC News anchor Tom Brokaw.

Union officials said long after NBC and other organizations had taken steps to protect their workers, post of-

fice officials were downplaying the risk in postal facilities.

"They have been lying to the workers all along and have endangered workers by lying to them," said William Smith, president of the Metro Area Postal Union, which represents 10,000 clerks, drivers and maintenance workers.

"Workers would have been more cautious had they known there was anthrax in the system," Smith said. "But they didn't want to tell us that because that would have slowed down the mail."

Representatives from postal unions met with Postal Service management Friday to address their concerns.

Pat McGovern, a spokeswoman for

the Postal Service in the New York region, said the agency had not acted more quickly because health officials had assured them no action was necessary.

But McGovern said the agency began testing about 100 workers Friday at the Morgan, Times Square and Rockefeller Center mail centers. Smith said workers from the Grand Central Station and Radio City mail facilities also were being tested.

Technicians from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention will arrive at those postal facilities Saturday, and will determine whether they need to be disinfected, McGovern said.

So far, no postal employee has test-

ed positive for anthrax exposure in the New York City region, McGovern said.

McGovern said the Postal Service lacks the ability to determine whether mail passing through the system is tainted with potentially deadly anthrax. About 21 million pieces of mail are delivered in New York City each day.

"Right now, are we checking inside envelopes? No," McGovern said. "We do not have that technology in place and I don't know if that technology exists."

Smith said the postal service has been slow to take basic precautions like instructing workers on what to do if they encounter suspicious materials, or disseminating evacuation plans.

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