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Pataki Quits Manhattan Office After Anthrax Is Found

By ERIC LIPTON

Gov. George E. Pataki and his staff evacuated his Midtown Manhattan office yesterday and immediately began taking antibiotics after preliminary tests found anthrax spores in an area within his office where his state police security detail is based.

There was no immediate explanation for the possible origin of the contamination and no one has been diagnosed as having been infected or exposed, although testing of at least some of the 75 workers on the 38th and 39th floors of the state offices at 633 Third Avenue is under way.

"We are going to continue to run the state government from here and run it well," Mr. Pataki said during a news conference at the Jacob K. Javits Convention Center, where the office has temporarily been relocated.

A letter that the governor's secretary in Manhattan opened late last month had initially been suspected as a source of the bacteria. But as of yesterday, investigators had all but ruled out this letter, even though they reluctantly acknowledged that they were not sure where it was.

Given the small levels of anthrax found, Bernard B. Kerik, the city police commissioner, said it is "very possible" that state police accidentally carried anthrax spores back to their office after recently escorting the governor to ABC and NBC news offices, where the bacteria has been found or was suspected to be present.

The developments in Washington and the governor's office inspired



Ozier Muhammad/The New York Times

Dr. Antonia C. Novello, left, the state health commissioner; Katherine N. Lapp, the state's criminal justice coordinator; and Gov. George E. Pataki at a temporary office at the Jacob K. Javits Convention Center.

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broadened testing of major government facilities throughout the state. The Capitol, City Hall, the city's police and fire department headquarters, and other government offices were all to undergo tests.

"We're doing mail rooms, we're doing places and desks where we feel mail may come into those buildings or offices," Mr. Kerik said. "It's strictly precautionary."

The state police officers assigned to the office where the anthrax spores were found are also being tested for exposure. But Mr. Pataki said he has no plans to be tested.

"I don't believe it is necessary," the governor said. "I honestly believe that the likelihood of any contamination is very slim."

At NBC News, where the first city anthrax infection case surfaced last Friday, executives announced that results on 850 of the 1,304 people tested were complete and all were negative. There is still only one confirmed positive case, Erin M. O'Connor, an aide to the news anchor Tom Brokaw.

Tests from inside the 30 Rockefeller Center offices — where an anthrax-laced letter mailed from Trenton on Sept. 18 was opened — found some remaining evidence of anthrax spores in the isolated areas where the letter had been carried, Andrew Lack, NBC News's president, said.

These areas will need to be thoroughly cleaned before they can be reoccupied, including the replacement of carpets and furniture and repainting the third floor NBC newsroom. City and federal health officials said the hazard was over elsewhere in the building, and that there was no current threat to staff at NBC's New York headquarters.

"We can all breathe a collective sign of relief," Mr. Lack said in an e-mail message to NBC employees. "It is safe to work at 30 Rock."

At ABC, there was also some good news. Tests on filters taken from the air ventilation system came back negative, although the results of dozens of other tests were still not available as of yesterday evening. About 150 employees had been tested as of late yesterday afternoon for possible anthrax exposure and more were expected to be tested. The results were not yet available.

The 7-month-old boy who tested positive for anthrax after visiting ABC News on Sept. 28 continues to improve, his mother said yesterday.

The traces of anthrax found at the governor's office were isolated to a small room on the 39th floor where state police officers are stationed. Tests in the mail room; the governor's personal office, also on the 39th floor; his secretary's office; and the ventilation system were all negative.

Suspicion first surfaced at the governor's office after his secretary became ill and then remembered an unusual letter she had opened, postmarked Sept. 25. She turned the letter over to the state police unit and she and several other employees in the office were tested for exposure, tests that proved negative.

On Monday night, after the NBC and ABC cases were disclosed, the governor's office decided to do tests in the office, the results of which were available yesterday morning.

State officials said that they were not sure now where that letter has gone — it was sent from within New York State — but that they knew who had mailed it and had interviewed the person and were confident it was not the source of the anthrax.

"The state police and the F.B.I. will do what they do very well, which is investigate all of the possible sources," Mr. Pataki said.

All the testing, and the closing of the city health department's lab, have put intense stress on the state Health Department's Wadsworth Laboratories near Albany.

"We are not going to be able to have instant results," the governor said. "But we don't see a serious backlog developing."

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