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THE POSTAL WORKERS

# Manhattan Mail Sorters Fear They Will Be Next

By STEVEN GREENHOUSE

Ten stories high and covering two full city blocks, Morgan Station, New York City's largest mail-sorting center, looks like a fortress, but that has not stopped many of its workers from feeling a sense of dread.

After anthrax killed two postal workers at a sorting center in Washington and infected three New Jersey postal workers, many of Morgan Station's 5,500 workers fear that they will be next.

These workers know that anthrax-carrying letters were mailed from Trenton and arrived at the offices of NBC and The New York Post in Manhattan. Because virtually all the mail that enters Manhattan is processed at Morgan, at 29th Street and Ninth Avenue, there is a pervasive fear among the center's workers that those letters passed through Morgan's cavernous halls.

"Of course we're worried," said Luis Sanabria, a mail handler for 34 years who said he was likely to move up his retirement date because of the anthrax scare. "This is a big installation, and everything comes through here. I don't know if I will be next, but that thought is in the back of everyone's mind."

Never known for taking a warm attitude toward management, the postal workers now seem angrier at the Postal Service than at whoever is sending the tainted letters.

Many postal employees complain that until Tuesday, management had told them next to nothing about how to identify anthrax. As hundreds of workers poured onto the sidewalks at the end of the 8 a.m.-to-4 p.m. shift yesterday, workers criticized management for not ordering anthrax tests for all of Morgan's workers.

"Everybody's scared," said Gene Banilover, a mail sorter. "I think it's in the air here. I wish they'd close this place down for tests."

The Postal Service has begun random anthrax tests for several dozen Morgan workers and has tested for anthrax spores at many spots in the building. So far, postal officials have not said whether any results were positive or negative.

To reduce the chances of spreading anthrax spores, the Postal Service has stopped using blowing machines that clean dust off Morgan's sorting equipment, which often handles two million pieces of mail a day.

In the most important effort to address the alarm among the city's mail handlers, the Postal Service and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention said on Tuesday that they would make Cipro available to 7,000 Manhattan postal workers. The post office said it would offer the drug at Morgan, the James A. Farley Building, Ansonia Station, Radio City Station, Rockefeller Center Station and Times Square Station.

Dr. Stephen Ostroff, an epidemiologist with the Centers for Disease Control, said the distribution was "purely a precautionary move," and he warned pregnant women not to take the drug. He said he believed that the suspicious letters had passed through the New York postal

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Postal workers who had finished their shifts leaving Morgan Station, 29th Street and Ninth Avenue. Many are worrying about anthrax.

system more than a month ago and that he was not aware of any New York postal workers reporting symptoms of anthrax.

At a news conference yesterday with Mayor Rudolph W. Giuliani, City Health Commissioner Neal L. Cohen said his department planned to work with the federal government to give Cipro to the 7,000 postal employees. He voiced concern that postal sorting equipment sent spores from anthrax-carrying envelopes into the air.

Postal officials said they hoped to begin distributing Cipro as early as today, but many workers said yesterday that management had told them nothing about plans to give out the drug. Postal officials said they were informing different groups of workers about Cipro in different shifts.

William Smith, president of the New York Metro Area Postal Union, which represents 10,000 workers, attacked the decision to give Cipro. He threatened a lawsuit seeking to have Morgan closed until all the workers were tested. "It would be much better to test people first, and if employees come up positive, then to treat them," he said. "Why would you give people antibiotics first and have them get into all the side effects?"

Robert Witsell, who pushes large mail-filled carts, said, "If they issue those pills, either they're not telling you something or they're going to make us more suspicious."

Beverly Gill, another mail sorter, praised the post office. "We don't know what spores are floating around here," she said. "It's better to be safe than sorry."

Many medical experts warn of side effects from Cipro. But the health system may be hard-pressed to conduct anthrax tests on 7,000 workers, medical experts say.

Since the anthrax scare began in New York two weeks ago, most Morgan workers have begun wearing gloves and surgical masks to protect against possible anthrax spores.

Mike Green, a burly mail sorter, said management had been so tone-deaf about the anthrax threat that until recently, it did not want to provide gloves. "Just a week ago, we had to fight for the gloves," he said.

Mario Pesa, who separates small envelopes from large ones and stamped mail from metered, said he was thinking of buying a gas mask. "This thing is real," he said. "It's not just talk. It's hitting home. It's time for people not to panic. It's reality and we have to deal with it."

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