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Trail of the tape leaves anthrax inside City Hall

By KIRSTEN DANIS

Anthrax has shown up for the first time in City Hall — after an apparently contaminated videotape sent there by NBC tested positive for the deadly bacteria, Mayor Giuliani disclosed yesterday.

The package, which contained footage of a Sept. 18 White House ceremony, sat in Giuliani Chief of Staff Tony Carbonetti's office for at least several weeks before it was sent for testing.

"No one that touched the tape, or was near it has any symptoms of any kind," Giuliani said.

Carbonetti said he and at least one aide who handled the tape have not yet been tested for exposure and are not taking antibiotics.

"The CDC guys came in. When they left, I said, 'I'm going back in [my office],' and they said OK," Carbonetti said.

The Centers for Disease Control and the city Health Department swabbed Carbonetti's office and VCR yesterday to check for more traces of anthrax.

City Health Commissioner Dr. Neal Cohen said authorities are "confident" no one is likely to get sick from the exposure.

"We're certainly going to keep a close eye out," Cohen added.



SCHUMER
Not joking.

Schumer's bill would jail, fine terrorism pranksters

Anyone pulling an anthrax hoax — or any other terrorism prank — could end up getting five years in federal prison, under a new measure sponsored by Sen. Chuck Schumer.

"What might have passed for a good joke four or five months ago can't be done now," Schumer said yesterday in his Midtown office.

Tricksters would face up to five years in prison, have to hand over a fine averaging $10,000 and pay restitution for any law-enforcement resources spent on the hoax.

Schumer said cops and prosecutors have been stymied because there isn't a law that bans pulling a terrorism hoax. *Kirsten Danis*

Officials believe that the package picked up bacteria from a tainted letter sent to NBC anchor Tom Brokaw's office. Brokaw's assistant discovered on Oct. 12 that she was infected with skin anthrax linked to the letter.

"We feel pretty confident it was cross-contamination. This is not new contamination," Brokaw's representative Barbara Levin said.

An NBC messenger brought Carbonetti the tape at City Hall "several days" after Sept. 18, Levin said. The footage was sent to Carbonetti as a courtesy because President Bush acknowledged him in it.

Carbonetti said he did not open the package or watch the tape until sometime during the first week of October.

After reports of anthrax began surfacing, Carbonetti sent the envelope and its contents to be tested.

News of the contamination came as:

■ Officials revealed that a total of three men who live near the Trenton, N.J., post office that processed at least three anthrax-tainted letters have been questioned by the FBI in the past week. The men — including one arrested Friday — have been turned over to federal immigration officials.

■ Tests at a post office in the southern New Jersey town of Bellmawr, where a worker is believed to have contracted skin anthrax, came back positive for the bacteria.

■ Trace amounts of anthrax were found in the Veteran Affairs Medical Center in Washington, D.C. The hospital gets its mail from the Brentwood postal facility, where two workers have died from inhaled anthrax.

■ The CDC, fearful of a new bioterror attack, is inoculating its front-line medical workers against smallpox.

■ Officials are preparing to douse the Hart Senate Office Building with bacteria-killing chlorine dioxide gas.

■ The FBI is set to begin testing barrels of quarantined government mail in D.C. for anthrax.

■ A suspicious letter mailed to the Treasury Department is also being tested. It has the same Trenton postmark — and a similar handwritten address — as the tainted envelopes.

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