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Masks Ordered At Mail Facility

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A federal judge yesterday ordered that safety masks and protective gloves be distributed to all 5,000 employees at the main employee entrance of the Manhattan mail sorting facility where anthrax spores were found.

U.S. District Court Judge John Keenan, who is presiding over the lawsuit by postal workers seeking to close the Morgan mail sorting facility until it can be decontaminated, also ordered that notices be posted, informing workers that antibiotics are available to them.

The safety equipment and medicine have been available, but Keenan was apparently responding to the haphazard distribution methods wary postal employees have complained about in the case. He noted employees have also complained they have to enter anthrax-contaminated areas before obtaining the masks and gloves.

"Any reason why you couldn't issue masks and gloves where the employees *enter* the building?" Keenan asked Robert Darvuk Sr., plant manager with the Postal Service. "Why don't you do that?"

During the third day of hearings yesterday, Morgan officials testified they first learned on Oct. 11 that an anthrax-tainted letter was sent to NBC and probably went through Morgan and a satellite mail facility.

But their testimony described what appeared to be a slow response to that news. Thomas Cash, a human resources analyst for Morgan, testified tests were not conducted on machines that may have processed the letter until 10 days later on Sunday, Oct. 21. And after it was learned on Oct. 24 that five sorting machines tested positive for anthrax on the building's third floor, Cash testified that cleanup did not begin until Nov. 1.

The first company hired to decontaminate was eventually fired from the job after it took too long for them to start, Cash said. Cleanup is still under way at the facility, he said.

"They [the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention] had no problem with employees working there," Darvuk testified. "They felt there was no one at risk."

Keenan appeared aware of a decision made Wednesday by a federal judge in New Jersey, who ordered the temporary closure of a postal facility there where anthrax was also found, and a worker tested positive for cutaneous anthrax. That facility remained closed yesterday as a hearing was held on that case.

Several times yesterday, Keenan interrupted lawyers to grill postal officials on their handling of the anthrax situation. Upon learning for the first time yesterday that postal officials had upgraded the level of safety masks without saying anything, he exclaimed, "The judge is like the husband, he's always the last to know!"

The hearing continues today.

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