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Mail link eyed in Bx. anthrax

Letter to a neighbor processed with pol's

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A letter mailed to a Bronx address near the home of anthrax victim Kathy Nguyen passed through postal machines in Trenton with the anthrax-filled letter sent to Sen. Patrick Leahy, sources said.

Investigators are trying to track down the Bronx letter to see if it was cross-contaminated with anthrax. If so, that could link Nguyen's anthrax death to the mail, said a source familiar with the investigation.

The source said U.S. Postal Service computers show a Bronx-bound letter was postmarked in Trenton on Oct. 9, the same place and date as the Leahy letter.

The Bronx letter passed through a Trenton mail sorting machine seconds behind the Leahy letter.

The FBI and postal inspectors have not yet retrieved the Bronx letter, which a source said is addressed to a location "very close" to Nguyen's apartment at 1031 Freeman St.

The Bronx letter could conceivably explain the mysterious death of Nguyen, a 61-year-old worker at a Manhattan hospital who died Oct. 31 of inhalation anthrax.

Five have died

Nguyen remains the most enigmatic victim in the anthrax scare that has gripped America since letters filled with anthrax were mailed to NBC anchor Tom Brokaw, the New York Post and Sens. Leahy (D-Vt.) and Tom Daschle (D-S.D.).

Nguyen was one of five victims who died of inhalation anthrax. A handful of others were infected but successfully treated with antibiotics.

Of 18 confirmed anthrax cases, those of Nguyen and 94-year-old Ottilie Lundgren had been the only ones without clear connections to the mail.

On Friday, officials discovered an anthrax-tainted letter at a home in Seymour, Conn., a mile from Lundgren's home in Oxford. Lundgren died of inhalational anthrax Nov. 21.

Although they haven't found an anthrax-tainted letter sent directly to Lundgren, investigators now believe Lundgren may have contracted anthrax through cross-contaminated mail.

They tracked down the Connecticut letter by tapping into a computer database of bar codes the U.S. Postal Service uses that shows the precise time and date a letter is sorted and its destination down to the zip code.

"It's never been used in the past as an investigative tool," said Paula McCarren, a spokeswoman for postal inspectors in Connecticut. "It's now part of the investigation."

Examining bar codes of 300 letters that ran through the Trenton sorting machine right after the Leahy letter, they found a letter mailed to a home in Seymour a mile down Great Hill Road from Lundgren's modest ranch home.

They also discovered data showing a letter sent to a Bronx address close to Nguyen, the source said. On Friday postal officials would not comment on the Nguyen case.

Investigators are now trying to find the letter, which may be difficult given that it was postmarked nearly two months ago, the source said.

So far Nguyen's case has proved to be puzzling. She lived alone and led a quiet life in the Bronx, commuting by subway to a job in the Manhattan Eye, Ear & Throat Hospital supply room.

Hoping to find the source of anthrax that killed her, investigators tested her apartment, the subways, the hospital, even an East Side restaurant where she was friends with a waiter.

Negative results

All the tests proved negative for anthrax. They tested her mail, as well as the post office on nearby Southern Blvd. that services her building. No trace of anthrax was found.

That left the mail route as a dead end until the bar code data showed a Bronx letter near the Leahy letter.

The biggest problem with the cross-contamination theory is that the amounts of anthrax found on such letters is often tiny and considered harmless.

But health officials now speculate that elderly people like Lundgren (and to a lesser degree, Nguyen) might be more susceptible to even a tiny amount of anthrax.

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