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# Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-03-316](#), a report to the Ranking Minority Member, Committee on Governmental Affairs, U.S. Senate

## Why GAO Did This Study

In 2001, letters contaminated with anthrax resulted in 23 cases of the disease, 5 deaths, and the contamination of numerous U.S. Postal Service facilities, including the Southern Connecticut Processing and Distribution Center in Wallingford, Connecticut (the Wallingford facility). GAO was asked to address, among other matters, whether (1) the Postal Service followed applicable guidelines and requirements for informing employees at the facility about the contamination and (2) lessons can be learned from the response to the facility's contamination.

## What GAO Recommends

To help prevent a reoccurrence of communication problems, GAO recommends that the Postal Service, OSHA, GSA, and the National Response Team—a group chaired by the Administrator of EPA and comprising 16 federal agencies with responsibilities for planning, preparing, and responding to activities related to the release of hazardous substances—work together to revise their existing guidelines or regulations to, among other things, require prompt communication of available test results, including quantitative results, to workers and others, as applicable. The Service, EPA, and GSA generally agreed with our recommendations, indicating that they would work together to revise their guidelines. OSHA did not comment on our recommendations.

[www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-03-316](http://www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-03-316)

To view the full report, including the scope and methodology, click on the link above. For more information, contact Bernard L. Ungar, (202) 512-2834, [ungarb@gao.gov](mailto:ungarb@gao.gov).

## U.S. POSTAL SERVICE

# Better Guidance Is Needed to Improve Communication Should Anthrax Contamination Occur in the Future

## What GAO Found

The Wallingford facility first tested positive for anthrax in early December 2001. The contamination was found in samples collected from four mail-sorting machines in November. Analyses of the samples produced quantified results, including about 3 million anthrax colonies, or living anthrax cells, in one of the samples. While this was far more than the amount needed to cause death, none of the employees at the facility became sick from the anthrax contamination.

The Postal Service's decision not to inform workers about the number of anthrax colonies identified in December 2001 appears consistent with its guidelines because, according to the Service, it could not validate the results, as required. However, its subsequent decision not to release the results after an employee union requested all the facility's test results in January and February 2002, was not consistent with OSHA's requirement for disclosing test results that are requested. An OSHA investigation resulted in the Service's release of the quantitative test results in September 2002—about 9 months after the results were first known. Although OSHA did not issue a regulatory citation, it expressed concern about communication deficiencies.

In retrospect, the Service's decision not to release the quantitative test results in December 2001 was understandable given the challenging circumstances that existed at the time, the advice it received from public health officials, an ongoing criminal investigation, and uncertainties about the sampling methods used. However, numerous lessons can be learned from the experience, such as the need for more complete and timely information to workers to maintain trust and credibility and to help ensure that workers have essential information for making informed health decisions. Federal guidelines developed in 2002 by GSA and the National Response Team suggest that more—rather than less—information should be disclosed. However, neither the Service's guidelines nor the more recent federal guidelines fully address the communication-related issues that developed in Wallingford. For example, none of the guidelines specifically require the full disclosure of quantified test results. Likewise, OSHA's regulations do not require employers to disclose test results to workers unless requested, which assumes that workers are aware of the test results and know about this requirement.

### Decontamination Efforts at the Wallingford, Connecticut, Facility



Source: U.S. Postal Service.