

**CONGRESS RETURNS, WARILY;  
WITH OFFICES CLOSED, OTHER  
SPACE FOUND**

By Juliet Eilperin and Helen Dewar  
*The Washington Post*  
October 23, 2001

The House and Senate will reconvene today after a nearly week-long recess, but in a sign of extraordinary concern over anthrax contamination on Capitol Hill, congressional leaders decided late yesterday to keep closed the six buildings that provide office space for lawmakers and their committees until testing is completed.

Faced with an indefinite office shutdown, House and Senate leaders secured temporary space for members elsewhere on Capitol Hill. The unprecedented move underscored the pressure lawmakers are under to demonstrate they can conduct the nation's legislative business during a time of crisis.

With 5,000 congressional staffers and Capitol Police tested so far for exposure to anthrax bacteria, the number exposed has remained steady at 28 since late last week, according to police spokesman Lt. Dan Nichols. No sites have tested positive since Saturday, when investigators detected anthrax on a mail-bundling machine in the Ford House Office Building.

"The Capitol, of course, has been safe and we have ample reason to believe within the next few days we'll be able to open the [office] buildings as well," Senate Majority Leader Thomas A. Daschle (D-S.D.) said.

Nichols said the decision to convene today "is an indication that the Capitol is approved to be occupied . . . and an

indication to the nation that the legislative business continues."

Since Saturday's discovery, lawmakers have been concerned the potentially deadly threat has spread beyond the letter with anthrax spores that was opened in Daschle's suite in the Hart Office Building Oct. 15.

The Capitol building reopened yesterday under heavy security after being swept by hazardous-materials crews over the weekend. Its normally bustling corridors were virtually deserted, and activity was confined largely to the office suites of Senate and House leaders. The Capitol remained off-limits tourists.

The House had been shut down since Wednesday -- and the Senate since Thursday -- to allow health authorities to check for traces of anthrax. House members had been widely criticized for leaving town while the Senate remained in session an additional day.

House leaders arranged yesterday for lawmakers to operate out of the General Accounting Office building. All senators will be allowed to have two aides in the Postal Square office building near Union Station, and senators who do not have hideaways in the Capitol will be given access to other office space in the Capitol.

"We're going to function, one way or another," said Rep. Robert W. Ney (R-Ohio), who chairs the House Administration Committee. He added that each House member can bring three aides to the ad hoc offices at 441 G St. NW. "It will be skeletal."

House committees also began to seek other meeting sites. The Government Reform Committee, for example, is set to

hold a hearing at the Health and Human Services Department this morning.

House leaders have quietly made arrangements to conduct legislative business at Fort McNair, a nearby military facility, in case of an emergency. But top Republicans and Democrats said they saw no immediate need to move the House to a new site.

Rep. Steny Hoyer (Md.), ranking Democrat on Ney's committee, said leaders had identified several alternate sites for Congress. "That started on September 12."

Yesterday the Capitol took on a surreal quality, as leaders conferred with health experts in a largely empty building. "It's eerie," said Rep. James P. Moran (D-Va.) after touring the Capitol. "It's a ghost town."

On the Senate side of the Capitol, corridors were virtually deserted, and the only major event of the day – aside from closed-door meetings on anthrax – was a reception for Israeli Foreign Minister Shimon Peres, hosted by Daschle and Minority Leader Trent Lott (R-Miss.). Peres was all but ignored in a hail of anthrax-related questions from reporters to the Senate leaders, who said questions about terrorism were nothing new to the veteran Israeli leader.

Later, Sen. Edward M. Kennedy (D-Mass.) said he was optimistic about prospects for a bioterrorism bill that he and Sen. Bill Frist (R-Tenn.) are drafting to pump billions of dollars into vaccines and antibiotics to protect Americans from deadly diseases spread by terrorists. Kennedy said the bill will add between \$ 4 billion and \$ 6 billion to the \$ 2 billion already provided in the \$ 40 billion

emergency counterterrorism bill passed last month.

At an evening press briefing, Nichols declined to discuss reports that preliminary tests detected traces of anthrax in the Capitol's Lyndon Baines Johnson Room just off the Senate floor and used by the Senate Democratic majority for weekly lunches and caucuses. Nichols said the FBI had asked to analyze clothes that Daschle's staff wore while in the room but determined it was "not necessary to the furtherance of their investigation."

"The environmental and health care experts advised us there is no concern to the health of anyone in that room," he said. Nichols declined to discuss what, if any, earlier findings of anthrax exposure had been made.

Senators often trickle back to town on Mondays, and fewer than normal appeared to be on hand yesterday. But some worked out of their Capitol hideaways. Senate Armed Services Committee Chairman Carl M. Levin (D-Mich.) gathered about a dozen staffers in his hideaway office.

Meanwhile, Rep. Brian Baird (D-Wash.) and several congressional experts debated downtown in a forum titled "What If Congress Were Obliterated?" Baird has introduced a constitutional amendment allowing governors to appoint House members in the case of a disaster.

"This isn't a pleasant thing to think about, to say the least," he acknowledged. "We have a significant problem."

