

THE HUMAN ELEMENT IN KEEPING NATION SAFE

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Christian Science Monitor
February 6, 2004

Despite more than \$ 1 billion spent on enhanced security in the US Capitol since its first bioterror attack in October 2001, safety even in one of the most protected work sites on earth still comes down to someone noticing something - and doing the right thing.

This week, a Senate intern noticed that dust on the mail sorter in majority leader Bill Frist's office seemed lumpier than usual. Instead of staff rushing in to see what all the fuss was about - as happened when anthrax spores plumed out of a letter in majority leader Tom Daschle's office in 2001 - the intern ordered everyone out of the room, and called the Capitol police.

But the fact that a deadly toxin could slip through the new mail screening protocols signals holes in the elaborate security perimeter that Congress built around itself. It's a microcosm of the nation's effort to improve homeland security.

"In spite of all the technology and science and detection equipment [in the Capitol], we still are very dependent on the observations of the individual to help trigger the alerting system," says Scott Lillibridge, director of the new Center for Biosecurity and Public Health Preparedness at the University of Texas, Houston. "But the system is beginning to work, and we're doing better."

The evacuation from the Dirksen Senate Office Building on Monday wasn't textbook perfect. Even after preliminary tests showed that the powder was ricin, a deadly toxin, congressional staffers working nearby

learned about the threat from CNN. Some went home, only to be notified hours later that their clothing may be contaminated, and they should shower and put their garments in plastic bags.

At the time of the anthrax attacks, the ventilation system in the Hart Senate Office Building was only shut down half an hour after a suspicious substance was discovered in a mailroom. No one outside Senator Daschle's suite was quarantined. Deliveries were allowed, and the buildings were not officially shut down until the next day.

Meanwhile, rumors abounded. In the early hours of the attack, a House leader claimed that anthrax had gotten into the ventilation system and tunnels. Communication broke down as well, as the GOP leaders closed down the House on an understanding that the Senate would do the same; It did not.

By contrast, controlled communication, prompt screening of air quality, and a rapid battery of tests helped curb speculation after this week's attacks. A check of HEPA filters in the Capitol's new ventilation systems quickly confirmed that ricin was not spreading. In addition to the Capitol Police, bioterror experts at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the US Army lab at Fort Detrick, Md., began tests. The FBI, the Environmental Protection Agency, and the US Marine Corps and Coast Guard also helped with the evaluation.

"We are light years ahead of where we were back then. ... Steps that took days to complete [in 2001] were finished within eight hours," said Senator Daschle.

Still, there are no quick answers on how to screen congressional mail for toxic substances in the future. One option is to scan all congressional mail remotely and

send it to members via e-mail.

For a fledgling biotech firm in Miami, the ricin scare has meant a spike in prospects. "Our stock has gone through the roof," says Geoff Green, chief operating officer of DOR BioPharma, Inc., which is developing a vaccine for ricin. Currently, there is no medical treatment.

Mr. Green credits President Bush's Project Bioshield - a 10-year, \$ 6 billion initiative to develop and stockpile vaccines against biological threats - as the impetus to start collaboration with the University of Texas on a ricin vaccine.

Congress has provided \$ 890 million in funding for Project Bioshield for fiscal 2004, but the plan is still stalled in the Senate. This week's attack could give the legislation a boost.

Another initiative likely to get a second look is a proposed constitutional amendment to ensure the continuity of Congress in the case of a catastrophe. The issue has been discussed on Capitol Hill for years, but has failed to catch on.

Currently, House members can be replaced only by a direct election, which requires at least 45 days. While US senators can be replaced by appointees, there is no way, short of expulsion, to replace a senator who is incapacitated, and that requires a quorum and a two-thirds vote. If a terrorist attack were to kill or disable large numbers of lawmakers, the legislative branch could be shut down for months or even years, experts say.

"It's obvious that Congress is targeted and that the institution is vulnerable. Whatever they do in terms of security isn't going to stop that. It's also clear from the two major

scares that they have had after 9/11 that incapacitation of lots of members is at least as great a threat as everybody being killed, probably greater," says Norman Ornstein, of the AEI-Brookings Continuity of Government Commission.

"One wonders how many bullets they dodge before they suddenly realize that it's time to act."