Montgomery County Department of Fire and Rescue Service
Fire and Explosive Investigations

Identification and Handling Procedures for Suspicious Packages and Letters

Question: How can I spot a potential letter bomb?

Mail bombs and suspicious letters and packages may bear restricted endorsements such as “personal” or “private.” This factor is important when the addressee does not usually receive personal mail at the office.

Addressee’s name/title may be inaccurate.

Return address may be fictitious.

Mail bombs may reflect distorted handwriting or the name and address may be prepared with homemade labels or cut and paste lettering.

Mail bombs may have protruding wires, aluminum foil, or oily stains and may emit a peculiar odor.

Cancellation or postmark may show a different location from the return address.

Mail bombs may have excessive postage.

Letter bombs may feel rigid or appear uneven or lopsided.

Parcel bombs may be wrapped with several combinations of tape used to secure them, and may be endorsed “Fragile—Handle With Care” or “Rush—Do Not Delay.”

Package bombs may have irregular shapes, soft spots, or bulges.

Package bombs may make a buzzing or ticking noise or sloshing sound.

Pressure or resistance may be noted when removing contents from an envelope or parcel. If this occurs, stop and immediately call 911.

What can you do to help prevent a mail bomb disaster?

Keep in mind that a bomb can be enclosed in either a parcel or an envelope, and its outward appearance is limited only by the imagination of the sender. However, mail bombs have some unique characteristics that may assist you in identifying a suspect mailing. To apply these factors, it is important to know the type of mail your organization normally receives. Do not hesitate to question a piece of mail or package that is out of the ordinary.
If you are suspicious of a mailing and are unable to verify the contents with the addressee or sender:
1. Do not open the article.
2. Isolate the mailing and evacuate the immediate area.
3. Do not put in water or a confined space such as a desk drawer or filing cabinet.
4. If possible, open windows in the immediate area to help vent potential explosive gases.
5. If you have any reason to believe the letter or parcel is suspicious, do not take a chance or worry about possible embarrassment if the item turns out to be innocent. Instead, call 911 to receive professional assistance.

What to do if an opened envelope with an unknown substance has spilled or is found on the premises or if you accidentally open a letter
1. If an immediate threat exists to health or life, call 911.
2. Do not attempt to clean up the substance.
3. Do not attempt to brush off contaminated clothing.
4. Wash your hands thoroughly with soap and water to prevent spreading any powder to your face, if a sink is readily available.

For further information, contact the
Montgomery County Department of Fire and Rescue Service
Fire and Explosive Investigations
240-777-2255

August 2008