



Protecting the messengers

Twin City carriers get appeal to test anthrax attack defenses

Hundreds of NALC members in Minnesota's Twin Cities will be asked in the coming months to help test a program designed to keep letter carriers healthy so they can deliver medicine in the wake of a terrorist anthrax attack.

The initiative, prepared by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, is a component of the Department of Homeland Security's "Cities Readiness Initiative," or CRI, to prepare local governments to deal with possible terror attacks. It was developed in partnership with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention as a way to ensure that those who need antibiotics in a crisis will get them as quickly as possible.

Under the plan, volunteer carriers from both Minneapolis Branch 9 and St. Paul Branch 28 must first undergo routine fitness tests. If they pass, they will be fitted with special face masks designed to filter out deadly airborne anthrax spores, and they will receive a small stockpile of powerful antibiotics to use to protect themselves—and their family members—against anthrax infection.

"In an anthrax attack, time is of the essence in preventing illness and death by getting antibiotics to those who have been exposed," HHS Secretary Mike Leavitt said in a statement. "By providing advance protection to letter carriers, we can gain the benefits of the unique capabilities of the Postal Service to get much-needed medicines to those who need them quickly."

In an emergency, the antibiotic-protected letter carriers, fitted with their masks, would be escorted by police officers as they deliver medicines to households in affected areas.

"Who better than the trusted American letter carrier to deliver medicine in a time of crisis," said NALC President William H. Young. "We know the streets and the houses in every neighborhood. It's only logical that our members would be called upon to serve our customers and our country in this way."

The NALC has participated in other Cities Readiness Initiative drills, beginning in 2006—five years after the deadly anthrax mailings that killed five people in 2001. In those tests, NALC members in Boston, Philadelphia and Seattle were escorted by police officers as they delivered test packages roughly the size and shape of an actual antibiotics kit to targeted addresses.

NALC Director of Safety and Health Brian Hellman said the union is happy to cooperate with the readiness campaigns so long as the union is involved in planning and carrying out the tests.

Hellman noted that letter carriers can have a major psychological impact on the populace in an emergency. "If their letter carrier is out there doing his job or her job without any panic, then the citizens feel they can breathe easier," he said.

Looking for volunteers

Although the Food and Drug Administration still needs to give its final approval to the readiness plan, solicitation of letter carrier assistance is moving ahead.

"Right now, we're starting to ask for volunteers," said Dan Garhofer, president of Branch 28, which has about 1,000 active carriers. "Over the next couple of months, we'll be doing standup talks, showing a video with President Young in it, and explaining the process."

Branch 9 President Pam Donato said the union has been deeply involved in the planning process. "All the agencies have been open to hearing how we think carriers will respond," she said. "We've gotten lots of information and a good glimpse of what's in store, and the union has been involved from every angle." The Minneapolis branch has about 1,500 active carriers.

Garhofer said volunteers would first go through an application process and fill out a health questionnaire. "They'll even have to be willing to remove facial hair," he added with a chuckle. That's necessary to make sure the special masks are tight.

Very few volunteers will be turned away, Donato predicted. "We're hoping for at least a 60 percent sign-up," she said, noting that carriers not selected to make deliveries would likely be assigned supporting roles at the postal stations involved.

Donato said that, fortunately, the logistics have been pretty well worked out already. "All the routes have been identified and the plan for the delivery of medicines has been worked out," she said.

Both branch leaders wanted to clear up the confusion that occurred when it was announced that carriers would get supplies of medicine for themselves and their families. Some reports stated—incorrectly—that carriers would stockpile all the antibiotics to be delivered in their homes. The plan does not call for letter carriers to turn their homes into dispensaries.

As one might imagine, the idea of advance access to medication has generated "lots of interest—and lots of questions," Garhofer said. "Generally, carriers have been very receptive. They

understand how important this is, as a job to serve the community as well as for personal protection."

"This is an enormous responsibility," Donato agreed. "It makes us feel like we're a part of something bigger, helping our security. It makes me proud to be a part of it."

Both local union leaders noted letter carrier-based emergency medical delivery programs could save many lives. Still, Donato said, "It's one of those things where, you hope it turns out well—but you really hope we never have to actually do it." ✉



The sixth class of the NALC Leadership Academy met for its second term during the first full week of October at the National Labor College in suburban Washington. Representatives from each of the union's 15 regions spent their classroom time in sessions led by national officers and Headquarters staffers on a variety of topics, including legislation and political action, how the economy impacts the Postal Service, and the union's changing demographics. They heard presentations on the Mutual Benefit Association and the Health Benefit Plan, and President Young participated in a lively Q-and-A session. Spoken and written communications skills were a major focus, including delivering speeches, improving writing skills and a class on creating branch newsletters and websites. Before students return for their final week in December, they will prepare special homework projects with their mentors.



Leadership Academy

