Best Practices for Mail Center Security

CORPORATE INCOMING AND OUTGOING OPERATIONS

— From the United States Postal Inspection Service

There are millions of businesses that use the mail. The vast majority of these have only 'one to a few' person(s) responsible for mail center-type operations. Of these millions of businesses, there are thousands of large, complex corporate mail center operations. The best practices listed below are a summary of well-developed mail center security procedures that can be used by any mail center. **Procedures applicable primarily to large mail centers are identified as such, and in bold.**

These recommendations come from businesses that use the mail and have been shared with the USPS for distribution to its customers. Since needs and resources are often different, every suggestion may not apply to all businesses. Mailers should determine which are appropriate for their company and conduct periodic security reviews of their operation to identify needed improvements. The list below contains general security concepts and a few specific examples of how to accomplish them.

General Mail Operation preventive recommendation:
— Appoint a Mail Security Coordinator (and an alternate if a large mail center)
— Organize a Mail Security Response Team, as practical, depending on the size of the mail center staff
— Create, update and/or review SOPs, Security Procedures, Disaster Plans, and Operating Plans. **Keep a back-up copy of plans off-site.**

— Train personnel in policies and procedures relative to mail security, i.e. biological, chemical, weapons or natural disasters
— Include from the staff, when possible, certified firefighters, biohazard handlers, and/or corporate safety, environment and health personnel, or, train personnel in these duties
— Members of the team should be equipped with cell phones/pagers and should be available up to 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, as is appropriate for the situation
— Information, and updates, about the personnel and response procedures should be published and distributed company-wide
— Federal Government Mail Managers should also refer to the General Services Administration (GSA) web site for specific and updated information on federal mail management policies and procedures
— Publish an After-Action or Incident Report after every incident
— Have senior management buy-in/sign-off on company's mail security procedures

General Safety and Security Procedures for Incoming/Outgoing Mail Areas
— Notify internal and external customers, as appropriate, of steps taken to ensure safety of mail
— Control or limit access of employees, known visitors and escorted visitors to the mail center with sign-in

sheets, badges, and/or card readers. **(Large mail operations include plant, workroom floor, etc.)**

— Subject to emergency exit safety requirements, lock all outside doors and/or prohibit doors from being propped open

— Require deliveries to be made in a restricted, defined area

— Restrict drivers (rest areas) to an area that is separate from the production/mail center facilities.
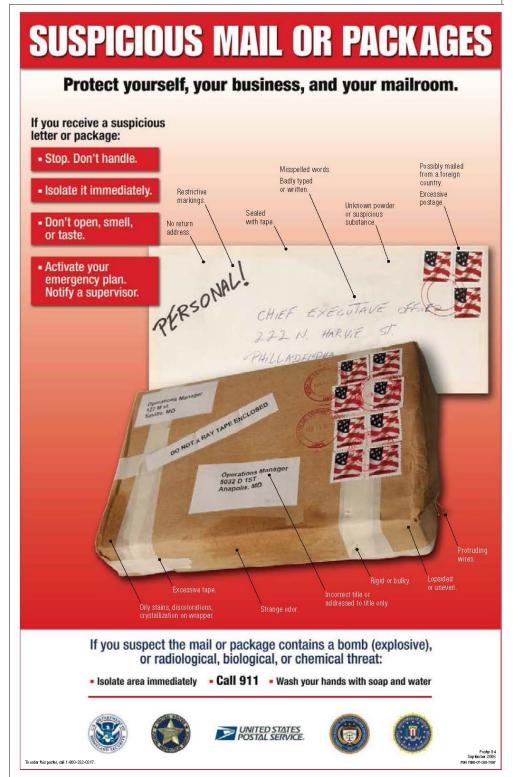
— Use video cameras inside and outside the facility/docks, as feasible

— Keep the area for processing incoming and outgoing mail separate from all other operations, as feasible

— If a separate processing area is used, it should not be part of the central ventilation system

— Shut-off points of processing area's ventilation system should be mapped and should be part of an emergency procedures handout

— Separate processing area should include appropriate personnel protection equipment and disposal instructions for such equipment, as approved by the CDC

— Designate and publish/post evacuation routes for emergencies

— Conduct training, emergency preparedness drills, and information update meetings, as necessary

— **X-ray all incoming mail. (Large mail centers.)**

— Maintain a Suspicious Package Profile

— Ensure appropriate emergency access numbers are posted by or on every phone. Such numbers should include: call 911; CDC at 770-488-7100; local Postal Inspector; local police or fire department

— Maintain updated employee lists (name, address, phone/cell phone), and keep back-up copy off-site

— Provide only vacuum systems for cleaning equipment, not forced air systems

— Alter receiving procedures to require a manifest with all shipments and practice the acceptance of "complete" shipments only

— Discarded envelopes, packages, boxes should be placed in a covered container and transported to the loading dock for removal. (Ensure local arrangements are in place for disposal of such material.)

Download the complete guide at www.mailomg.com.

SUSPICIOUS MAIL OR PACKAGES

Protect yourself, your business, and your mailroom.

If you receive a suspicious letter or package:

- Stop. Don't handle.
- Isolate it immediately.
- Don't open, smell, or taste.
- Activate your emergency plan. Notify a supervisor.

Restrictive markings.
No return address.
Misspelled words.
Badly typed or written.
Sealed with tape.
Unknown powder or suspicious substance.
Possibly mailed from a foreign country.
Excessive postage.
Protruding wires.
Rigid or bulky.
Lopsided or uneven.
Incorrect title or addressed to title only.
Strange odor.
Excessive tape.
Oily stains, discolorations, crystallization on wrapper.

If you suspect the mail or package contains a bomb (explosive), or radiological, biological, or chemical threat:

- Isolate area immediately
- **Call 911**
- Wash your hands with soap and water

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MAIL CENTER SECURITY
QUICK REFERENCE GUIDE

FOR SUSPICIOUS LETTERS AND PACKAGES

First, if there is a known medical emergency or chemical reaction with the mailpiece, call 911.
If you are unable to verify mail contents with the addressee or sender:

- ▼ Do not open it.
- ▼ Treat it as suspect.
- ▼ Isolate it—don't handle.
- ▼ Contact building security, if available.
- ▼ Call Postal Inspectors at 877-876-2455 if the item was received in the U.S. Mail.

FOR A BOMB

- ▼ Evacuate immediately.
- ▼ Call 911 for police, fire, and hazmat unit.
- ▼ Call Postal Inspectors at 877-876-2455 if the item was received in the U.S. Mail.

FOR CHEMICAL, BIOLOGICAL, OR RADIOLOGICAL CONTAMINATION

- ▼ Isolate it—don't handle.
- ▼ Wash your hands with soap and warm water.
- ▼ Call 911 for police, fire, and hazmat unit.
- ▼ Call Postal Inspectors at 877-876-2455 if the item was received in the U.S. Mail.

FOR AIR CONTAMINATION

- ▼ Turn off fans or ventilation units and shut down the air handling system in the building, if possible. Leave area immediately and close the door or section off the area to prevent others from entering it.
- ▼ Notify your building security official or a supervisor and call 911.
- ▼ If possible, list all people who were in the room or area. Give the list to public health authorities for any needed medical advice and to law enforcement authorities for follow-up.

FOR A PLACED DEVICE

Do not disturb. If you're unable to verify the owner:

- ▼ Evacuate immediately.
- ▼ Call 911 for police, fire, and hazmat unit.

— From the United States Postal Inspection Service, Mail Center Security, PUB 166

Mail Screening Best Practices

**From the Fifth Edition of the
Mail Center Security Guide
General Services Administration**

For efficiency and effectiveness, mail screening processes should be well-designed and properly integrated into the overall process of receiving, sorting, and delivering mail and parcels. A best practice is to identify and map out the current end-to-end mail receiving and delivery processes before inserting screening technologies or processes. When practical, mail screening operations should take place in a location isolated from other facility operations and separate from areas where personnel are screened.

Many aspects of screening technology selection will require a solid understanding of mail and parcel volumes, accountability procedures, transfer requirements, and courier routes. This is particularly important in small mail centers where a few individuals must perform multiple tasks sequentially. Process mapping enables the mail center manager to ensure the screening workflow does not create any unexpected security violations or unnecessary contamination.

> Individual screening processes may vary based on the risk assessment and the specific technology employed. Mail center personnel must be observant for suspicious mail and parcels at every stage.

Any deviation from approved procedures can easily lead to suspicious mail or parcels being missed or the inadvertent cross contamination of other items, equipment, facilities, or employees. Most screening procedures, including the visual identification of suspicious parcels, are focused on identifying threats (biological, chemical, etc.) while a few, such as x-ray scanners and vapor trace detectors, have multi-substance capabilities.

4.4.1 Integrating Screening Procedures

The following top-level processes represent a partial list for mapping and evaluating mail screening requirements. Though not applicable to every mail center operation, each step in the process presents opportunities for suspicious mail to enter the mail sorting system or be transferred from one employee to the next. Each step also provides an opportunity for suspicious mail to be identified, isolated, and contained before it can cause harm to the intended recipient.

4.4.1.1 Mail and Parcel Pickup from Designated U.S. Postal Service Facility

If mail is being picked up at USPS facilities, only authorized personnel specifically identified by the organization should be allowed to sign for materials. Mail center staff should designate and identify personnel authorized to sign for mail at the USPS facility.

4.4.1.2.1 Transportation to the Mail Center or Mail Screening Facility

Courier vehicles provided by the agency should be secured (e.g., padlock, locked seal, one-time locks) when loaded with mail and parcels during transport. Vehicles should be locked and attended at all times.

When receiving mail and parcels from couriers or other delivery services, personnel should be positively identified before accepting any items, and recipients should then validate that they are receiving the actual items on the manifest before signing for them.

4.4.1.2.2 Tracking and Accountability Process

All accountable mail items and parcels should be tracked by digital scanner or ledger from the moment they are picked up or received until they are delivered to and signed for by the intended recipient. Agencies should consider adopting digital tracking methods for accountable mail items.

4.4.1.2.3 Transfer of Mail and Parcels to Mail Center Screening Personnel

Mail and parcels should not be left unattended on the loading dock or in a publicly accessible area. Mail and parcels should not be left outside mail facilities after hours. Agencies should mandate a "warm handoff" as mail and parcels are transferred.

4.4.2 Screening Process Best Practices

Individual screening processes may vary based on the risk assessment and the specific technology employed. Mail center personnel must be observant for suspicious mail and parcels at every stage during the receipt, sorting, and delivery of mail. Many suspicious items, such as hoax letters and parcels containing hazardous materials, are capable of being detected early in the sorting process by properly trained mail handlers. USPS Publication 52, Hazardous, Restricted, and Perishable Mail provides im-

portant information to help mailers determine what may be mailed and how certain items must be packaged to keep the mail safe.

The following are indicators that further scrutiny may be required:

• Excessive postage, no postage, or non-canceled postage
• No return address or obvious fictitious return address
• Unexpected parcels or parcels from someone unfamiliar to you
• Improper spelling of addressee names, titles, or locations
• Unexpected envelopes from foreign countries
• Suspicious or threatening messages written on parcels
• Postmark showing different location than return address
• Distorted handwriting or cut-and-paste lettering
• Unprofessionally wrapped parcels or excessive use of tape, strings, etc.
• Parcels marked as "Fragile - Handle with Care," "Rush - Do Not Delay," "Personal" or "Confidential"
• Rigid, uneven, irregular, or lop-sided parcels
• Parcels that are discolored, oily, or have an unusual odor
• Parcels that have any powdery substance on the outside including powder under tape used to secure the parcel
• Parcels with soft spots, bulges, or excessive weight
• Protruding wires or aluminum foil
• Visual distractions
• Suspicious objects visible when the parcel is x-rayed

Mail trays, tubs, and individual items must be inspected for obvious signs of white powder, liquids, or suspicious markings as they are unloaded from a courier or mail vehicle at the loading dock. If detected, the suspicious items and the tray or tub used for transport should be immediately segregated.

4.4.2.1 Chemical

Continuous screening of the environment in and around the mail screening facility and/or mail center should be conducted.

4.4.2.2 Biohazards

Samples should be collected from mail and parcels and tested for common biological hazards at a Centers for Disease Control (CDC) Laboratory Response Network (LRN) laboratory or using onsite polymerase chain reaction (PCR) equipment. As a best practice, it is strongly recommended that any on-site testing that results in a positive detection event be verified and confirmed by the LRN. All mail items should be kept under quarantine in a negative pressure environment until negative test results have been obtained.

4.4.2.3 Radiation/Nuclear

Trucks and delivery vehicles should be screened as they are approaching the mail screening facility, and again at the loading dock. Screening methods should be based on the assessed risk of the threat.

4.4.2.4 Explosives

Screening of vehicles, mail, and parcels should be done using explosive detection canine teams prior to bringing items into the mail screening facility. Mail tubs or trays and individual parcels should be screened using an X-ray scanner equipped with explosive detection software. Other options include portable and handheld vapor trace detection systems.

4.4.2.5 Dangerous Items and Contraband

Screening for dangerous items should be done using aggressive, visual screening and the X-ray scanner.

4.4.2.6 Alternate Worksite Procedures

It is the agency's responsibility to develop a plan for receiving mail and parcels at an alternative worksite such as a telework center or employee residence. As a best practice, incoming mail should be screened at a federal facility before sending it to employees at alternative worksites.

Agencies should consider the following when developing alternate worksite policies:

• How employees will receive official mail (USPS, FedEx, UPS, other service provider(s) considering who the sender is)
• Refrain from sharing home addresses, when possible
• Consider setting up post office boxes (prevents release of home address)
• Accountable tracking for sending mail from alternative worksites
• Mail security steps employees must implement for receiving, sending, and storing official mail

4.4.2.7 Personal Protective Equipment

Personal protective equipment (PPE), including gloves, aprons, safety glasses and respirators, should be available for all mail center personnel. Use of respirators may not be required if the risk assessment does not support it. Consider special measures for mail facilities that routinely receive medical devices or other potential hazards.

If PPE is in use, mail center managers should ensure all equipment is kept clean and properly serviced and that all personnel receive training on its proper use. Further, these managers should establish a log to monitor employee initial training and periodic retraining since the equipment can be problematic. For example, removing gloves the wrong way can spread contamination. Likewise, respirators can induce respiratory problems in some people.

The CDC provides guidance on selecting PPE to protect against bioterrorism. For the most current information, refer to the Centers for Disease Control or Occupational Safety and Health Administration website.

Decontamination facilities such as emergency showers and eyewash stations should be in easily accessible areas within proximity to mail screeners.

(From the GSA's Mail Center Security Guide, Fifth Edition, August 2023. For a complete copy, go to www.mailomg.com)

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