

MAIL SECURITY ALERT

BY WILL PLUMMER
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RAYSECUR® MAIL

THREAT ALERTS catalog global open-source incidents reported to the media. Due to the lack of reporting to authorities, security leaders face sizable challenges in gaining a clear view of the types and volume of mail threats occurring worldwide. These reports serve to close that gap and provide timely information.

Threats from the mail, including letters and parcels, take many forms and are categorized by ten main substances.



BIOLOGICAL



THREAT LETTER



LIQUID



DRUGS



MONEY



WEAPON



IED/IID



POWDER



SUBOXONE STRIPS



OTHER

November, 2023

Special Threat Alert: Fentanyl-Laced Letters Sent to Election Sites in Five States

The use of fentanyl, a potentially lethal substance, in “white-powder” mail threats marks an escalation in the seriousness of threats against government entities. It indicates that the perpetrator desires personal harm against the recipient. This is in stark contrast to the use of more typical benign hoax substances, intended to merely disrupt operations, which historically have made up the vast majority of mail threats. Government agencies, particularly election offices, must be on high alert given the contentious political climate and perceived distrust of the election process.

White powder letters containing fentanyl, a deadly synthetic opioid, were sent to election offices in California, Georgia, Nevada, Oregon, and Washington. These events are significant for two reasons – their potential for personal harm and their scope. The use of fentanyl in targeted mail attacks, which can be deadly in extremely small quantities, is a paradigm shift from conventional “white-powder” letter hoaxes that contain benign substances intended to cause operational disruption and attract media attention instead of inflicting personal harm. The fentanyl-laced letters arrived just as absentee ballot counting began, indicating that the perpetrator knew that people would be handling the mail, putting them at significant risk of exposure.

"Government agencies are in a highly active threat landscape that is unlikely to lessen given the current political climate. Mail-in voting hasn't dramatically decreased since COVID, meaning the counting of physical ballots will continue. Local and state election officials likely do not have the level of security expertise needed to close all the gaps in the polling process. Understanding these new and emerging threats, and proactively implementing effective mail security strategies, will be critical to mitigating risk and protecting staff from mail-based threats." Will Plummer, CSO, RaySecur

Hospitalizations and even deaths from fentanyl concealed in mail are commonplace in corrections facilities, where the drug is often smuggled in mail sent to inmates. These recent events clearly indicate a spillover effect from the smuggling of these illicit substances to their use in weaponizing mail intended to inflict personal harm on the recipient.

Security advisors at RaySecur have long warned of a shift towards using fentanyl in targeted mail threats due to its ease of concealment, lethality in small quantities, prevalence, and low-cost. RaySecur's Threat Data Center has recorded a rise in the number of mail incidents where fentanyl is used against individuals, businesses, and even government entities throughout 2022 and 2023.

Mail has proven an effective tactic to target critical infrastructure, including high profile government and private-sector sites. Historically, there have been increases in mail threats tied to societal, political, and geopolitical events, among others:

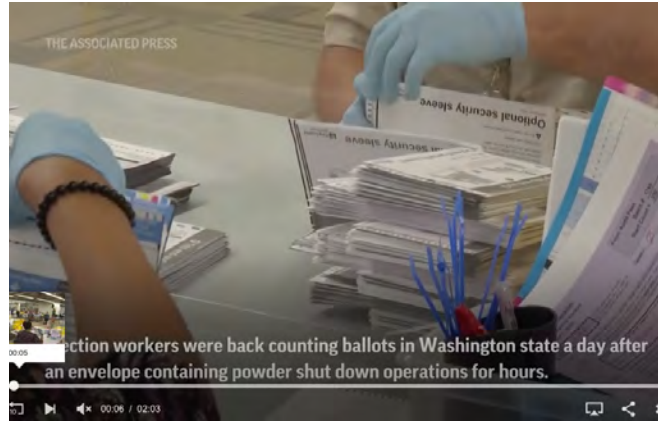
- Polling stations in each of the past several U.S. election cycles
- Religious sites, personal residences, and businesses due to the conflict in Israel
- Embassies linked to the war in Ukraine
- U.S. Legislators and court justices following Roe vs. Wade reversal
- N.Y. District Attorney investigating former President Trump


Government officials must reevaluate security measures for upcoming elections to better protect vulnerable state and local election sites and supporting staff, in light of these new and increasingly dangerous tactics. It is vital for those responsible for the security of sites to assess risks and evaluate how tasks are executed. Ensuring the safety of screeners by providing them with personal protective equipment (PPE) and training them on mail screening best practices is a simple, and often overlooked first step. Additional layers of security include developing standard operating procedures, and deploying screening technologies to detect the presence of potentially harmful substances concealed in the mail before it is opened.

Mail-based threats often get overlooked compared to other security priorities. However, the risk is very real, as evidenced by these recent events. These attacks against government officials and high-profile sites indicate how these threats can be sent at any time and can easily go undetected until it's too late. To keep people safe, it's essential to remain vigilant, recognize that mail is a relatively soft target, and implement effective mitigation measures.

Election offices are sent envelopes with fentanyl or other substances. Authorities are investigating

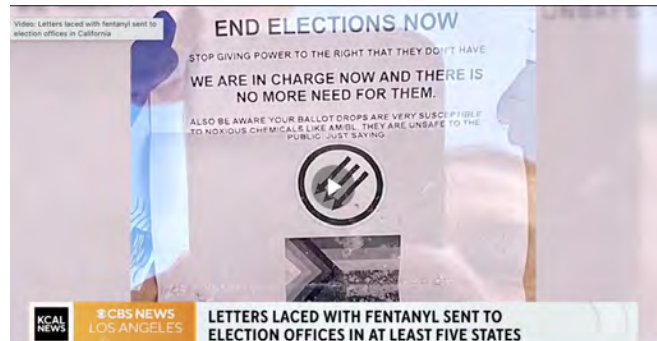
Authorities were hunting Thursday for whoever sent suspicious letters — including some containing fentanyl — to elections offices in at least five states this week, delaying the counting of ballots in some local races in the latest instance of threats faced by election workers around the country. The letters were sent to elections offices in the presidential battlegrounds of Georgia and Nevada, as well as California, Oregon and Washington, with some being intercepted before they arrived. Four of the letters contained fentanyl, the FBI and U.S. Postal Inspection Service reported in a statement to elections officials Thursday.




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Suspicious letters laced with fentanyl sent to election offices in California

The Los Angeles County Registrar said it was targeted by a national fentanyl mail threat where trace amounts of the drug were sent to election offices in five different states. Federal authorities are now searching for the person responsible. FBI and post office officials said some of those letters were intercepted before they could get to election facilities in Los Angeles and Sacramento.



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Fentanyl-laced letter sent to Fulton County elections office, officials say

Secretary of State Brad Raffensperger is responding to recent threats against election officials in Georgia. According to Raffensperger, a letter laced with fentanyl was sent to a Fulton County election official similar to letters that were sent to local election offices in other states.

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Lane County Elections counting ballots again after receiving suspicious mail

The third round of Lane County election returns, scheduled to be released at 5 p.m. Wednesday, were delayed after the elections office received “suspicious mail” that county officials said was sent to intimidate elections officials. The office received a piece of mail that an employee identified Wednesday afternoon as possibly containing a suspicious chemical, county spokesperson Devon Ashbridge said.

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Envelopes filled with white powder mailed to multiple county election offices across Washington

A sixth county election office received a suspicious envelope filled with white powder shortly after Washington’s General Election. The Thurston County Auditor’s Office received a suspicious piece of mail on Nov. 13 making it the sixth county elections office in Washington to be targeted around the General Election. Authorities say these offices have received envelopes filled with white powder. At least two of the envelopes tested positive for fentanyl, according to police in Renton and Spokane.



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Contaminated package forces closure

The Spokane County Elections Office was forced to close after an employee discovered an unknown white powder inside an envelope. This led to an evacuation and investigations into potential threats to election security. While the powder has tested negative for anthrax, the incident has raised concerns about the safety of election office personnel. Shortly after 10:00 a.m. on Nov. 8, the elections office was evacuated following the discovery.



Spokane County Auditor Vicky Dalton commended the quick and decisive actions taken by management and staff, saying, “Our staff immediately secured the facility and evacuated the building. The Spokane Fire Department Hazardous Materials Team and the Spokane Police Department quickly responded, tested the substance, and an investigation is underway.”

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Will's 25-year career with the US Army and Department of Defense spans service as a Master Explosives Ordnance Disposal Technician, to managing EOD operations as a commanding officer for all of Southeast Asia. He holds a Masters Degree in National Security and Irregular Warfare from the Naval War College.

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