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Statement of Rep. Henry A. Waxman Committee on Government Reform Hearing on

"Oversight of the U.S. Postal Service: The Safety of Postal Employees and the Mail" October 30, 2001

Mr. Chairman, thank you for holding this important hearing.

There are two questions we need to focus on today:

1. Is it safe for families, businesses, and government agencies to open their mail?
2. Is it safe for postal workers to handle the mail?

Ensuring the safety of the mail is a paramount federal responsibility. The public depends on the U.S. mail. We use the mails to stay in contact with family and friends, to pay our bills, and to transport goods. When the mail is not safe, our national economy cannot function properly.

Since the attack on our country on September 11, the Postal Service has delivered 20 billion pieces of mail. And since that time, only a handful of mail has been found to be contaminated with anthrax. The odds of any family receiving a contaminated letter during this period are vanishingly small.

But it is also clear that the mails are being used by terrorists to kill and injure innocent Americans. Since the September 11 attacks, anthrax-contaminated mail has killed three people and caused inhalation or cutaneous infections in at least 15 others. Most of those killed or injured have been postal workers who were unknowingly infected while serving the public.

I especially want to express my sympathies to the families of the Thomas Morris, Jr. and Joseph Curseen, Jr., the two postal workers who died earlier this month from inhalation anthrax.

We must do everything in our power to stop these terrorists and ensure the safety of the mail.

On September 11, terrorist attacks were launched on New York and Washington using airlines. Three days later, Congress provided \$40 billion to help New York and Washington respond. And just one week after that, Congress provided another \$15 billion to help the airlines cope.

The mails are now under attack. We must respond just as quickly and just as forcefully to protect the mails.

The Postal Service has said that the technology needed to respond to the anthrax attacks will cost \$2.5 billion. I fully support helping the postal service pay for its response to the anthrax threat. In fact, I believe the Postal Service may need even more money to adequately protect the mail.

But I also have questions about how this money will be spent. We need to act fast. But we also need to do it right.

The Postal Service should have done emergency planning before the recent attacks that would provide a blueprint for how to respond. But the Postal Service didn't do this. In fact, the only emergency planning by the Postal Service before September 11 involved how the Postal Service would respond if attacks were launched against other targets. The Postal Service had no plan for responding if the Postal Service itself were attacked.

As a result, the Postal Service is now trying to do emergency planning at the worst possible time -- in the midst of an emergency. Along the way, serious mistakes are being made, such as the tragedy at the Brentwood facility.

We cannot afford additional mistakes. Improvements will cost money, but throwing money into the system doesn't necessarily bring more safety. I will ask hard questions today about whether there is a magic "technological fix" to this problem. I will also ask questions about whether the right process is in place for making sound judgments. Ultimately, what we may need is a common-sense strategy that uses both low-tech safety precautions and new technologies.

It's natural for families to have concerns about postal safety, but this is a problem we can address and it's a problem that we must fix. Today's hearing will be an important part of that process.