Bills pile up for anthrax scares

Charlie Bier
Staff Writer

LAFAYETTE — The Department of Health and Hospitals will spend at least $7,200 to test unidentified substances for anthrax, a department spokesman said.

After more than a week of anthrax scares, more bills are piling up at local fire and police departments. And the frequent calls for officers, firefighters and hazardous materials crews are taking another kind of toll.

"It's putting wear and tear on the guys," said Lafayette Fire Chief Robert Benoit, "because they have to go on all these calls in addition to fires and other calls they make. It's putting a lot of added stress on the emergency responders."

In Lafayette alone last week, crews answered calls to Stuller Inc., where an unidentified white powder was found in a roll of toilet paper; at the Lafayette Parish Courthouse, where a bomb-threat call and a mysterious package in a stairwell forced more than 300 people away from their jobs for about three hours; at the Brandywine office complex on Kaliste Saloom Road, where police say a Jeanerette man gave an envelope full of salt to a social worker; and many other incidents involving unknown substances.

"It's been something every day this week," said Trooper Willie Williams of Louisiana State Police Troop I in Lafayette.

In most of the incidents, officials have sent samples of unidentified substances to state labs to test for anthrax.

DHH spokesman Bob Johannessen said the department had received 143 samples for testing as of Friday. That was up from 47 Tuesday.

Of the samples received, tests are complete for 110, Johannessen said. No anthrax has been found. The DHH is waiting for results from 33 samples.

Johannessen said the initial test of each sample costs $50. If the initial results show the possibility of anthrax contamination — and no results have turned out that way so far — the sample will be subjected to another test that costs $100.

Other costs have yet to be calculated.

Lafayette Parish Sheriff Mike Neustrom said the cost of responding to calls such as the courthouse bomb threat can be enormous.

"It would be hard to put a quick dollar amount on it, but the evacuation of the courthouse (Thursday) has got to be thousands of dollars at a minimum," Neustrom said.

"The problem is, so many agencies are involved. When you talk about the Fire Department, three police departments and the Sheriff's Department, that's a lot. It's very costly, very resource-intensive."

"The cost is definitely going to be there because of all the overtime hours," Louisiana State Police Lt. Mike Edmonson said. "But we haven't taken the time to pinpoint an exact cost because we've been so busy."

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Scares

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