



TO: Bennington State Office Building Stakeholder Team

FROM: Sharon Moffatt, RN, MSN, Commissioner
Vermont Department of Health

Tasha Wallis, Commissioner
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THROUGH: Charlie Gingo, Agency of Human Services
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RE: Investigation Update

DATE: September 21, 2006

In early June 2006, the Vermont Department of Health together with the Department of Buildings & General Services (BGS), initiated an investigation of health concerns among employees of the Bennington State Office Building. The primary health concern was identified as sarcoidosis – a disease characterized by inflammation in one or more organs.

Because sarcoidosis is a serious illness of unknown cause, the investigation has been extensive, including meetings with employees and the Building Stakeholders Team, a health survey of current and past employees, building inspection and environmental testing, employee medical screening tests and review of medical and death records.

All of the information taken together will be used to determine next steps – which may include relocation of employees and/or renovation or other remediation of the building. And, although the investigation will be thorough, it is possible we may not ultimately find the cause of sarcoidosis cases.

We will keep you updated with new information as this investigation continues. Meanwhile, if you or others in the building have questions, please continue to bring them to the Building Stakeholders Team. We will do our best to answer your questions as quickly as possible.

In addition, we advise any employee who has specific health concerns to consult with his or her own health care provider.

UPDATE

These updates and other detailed information on the investigation as it progresses are always available on the Health Department's website: healthvermont.gov, then select Community Public Health.

Employee Medical Screening

Starting Tuesday, Sept. 19 and continuing through Thursday, Sept. 28, Health Department investigators – in collaboration with National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) expert technicians – are offering medical screening tests for anyone who works more than 20 hours per week in the building.

This is an important part of the investigation. Everyone who is eligible is encouraged to participate. The tests are voluntary and free of charge, and can provide employees with more complete and detailed information about their own respiratory health. NIOSH will send to each participant his or her own test results three weeks following the testing, and we encourage each person to share these results with his or her own health care provider.

- **Anyone who has not signed up can still do so – call Sue Nutting at 442-8138.** Detailed information on the tests and a Consent to Participate in Health Hazard Evaluation are available on site and at the Health Department's website.
- As of Thursday, Sept. 21, 98 people had signed up for testing.

Alert to Health Care Providers (attached)

On Sept. 15, the Health Department alerted health care providers in the Bennington area about the investigation and the employee medical screening tests – and informed them that we are encouraging employees who participate in the testing to share their results with their health care provider.

Health Survey – Current Employees

Participation in the survey of current employees and contractors who work in the building 20 or more hours per week was high (77%). A preliminary finding showed that the percentage of employees reporting physician-diagnosed asthma – and the percentage of employees reporting symptoms consistent with asthma (wheezing, coughing attacks and shortness of breath) – is much higher than would be expected. Additional results from the survey will be available next week.

Health Survey – Former Employees

On Sept. 15, a similar survey was mailed to former employees (and any contractors identified to us) who worked in the building 20 or more hours per week as far back as 1994. Respondents are asked to complete the questionnaire and return it to the Health Department by the end of the month.

Environmental Testing

Preliminary results from the environmental testing conducted by the contractor ATC Associates, Inc. are expected next week. In addition, the Health Department has taken drinking water samples from taps on each of the three floors, and testing for an array of inorganic and volatile organic chemicals is underway at the Health Department Laboratory. Water testing results will also be available next week.

QUESTIONS & ANSWERS

Following are the questions raised at the Sept. 14 Building Stakeholders Team meeting with answers compiled by the Department of Health, Agency of Human Services and the Department of Buildings & General Services (BGS).

Medical Screening Tests

Q. Why were these specific three tests chosen and not tests such as chest x-rays focused on sarcoidosis?

A. The tests – spirometry; methacoline challenge and DLCO (diffusing capacity of the lung for carbon monoxide) are the standard battery of non-invasive screening tests used by NIOSH and pulmonologists to measure various aspects of breathing and lung function and to screen for lung diseases such as asthma or sarcoidosis.

Q. Is there a plan to offer more diagnostic testing on a voluntary basis?

A. No. The tests offered this month are an important part of the investigation and all eligible employees are encouraged to participate. However, anyone who has health concerns should consult with their own health care provider for individual diagnostic testing. We have alerted health care providers in the Bennington area about the investigation and the medical testing, and have encouraged providers to call the Department of Health with any questions they may have.

Environmental Testing

Q. Is water testing part of the overall investigation? How long will it take for the analysis of water testing to be done?

A. As part of the investigation, the Health Department took samples of drinking water from taps on each of the three floors in the building, and testing is underway at the Health Department Laboratory for inorganic and volatile organic chemicals. Test results should be ready next week.

Q. Does it make sense have the soil sampled from the community garden that Department of Corrections plants? Could the deer or deer droppings at the deer park cause any illness in the building? Will there be soil testing near the deer park?

A. At this point there is no reason to think that soil around the building could be a cause of illness in the building, and it is not possible to speculatively test every substance for every potential toxin. There is no known association between deer or deer droppings and

disease such as sarcoidosis.

Q. What may have caused carpet in the Economic Services workspace to grow mold or whatever it may be? Is there some way to ascertain why that area is moldy or musty?

A. Judging from the description of what happened in that office, it is likely there was water intrusion in that area that was covered by the hard plastic pad under the chair, and this allowed conditions for mold to grow. When the plastic was moved, mold spores were released into the air. Testing would add nothing more to the information that mold was present.

Q. Is BGS bidding out to clean roof ballast? What recourse does staff have to ask that testing the roof ballast or in the Economic Services office be reconsidered?

A. Health Department investigators have informed BGS that they can resume routine maintenance but not major renovation. BGS has advertised for proposals from contractors and plans to clean it as soon as all environmental testing is complete. Any pollutant we can test for coming in from the roof ballast should show up in the air sampling, carpet sampling and/or vent sampling that has been completed. Testing the roof ballast itself or the organic material on it would not be likely to add any new information.

The same is true for the Economic Services office. Samples already taken are being analyzed for mold in general, but these tests cannot specify what type of mold. Observation of mold is valid evidence of mold, and further testing wouldn't provide any more specific or useful information.

However, we will wait to decide about whether to do additional environmental sampling and testing until all the information currently being collected is analyzed and reviewed. Preliminary results from the environmental testing should be ready next week.

Relocation

Q. Is BGS waiting for a Health Department recommendation about whether employees are relocated? How much influence will the Health Department have in terms of whether we relocate people?

A. The Department of Buildings and General Services (BGS) has looked to the Health Department to design and conduct the investigation, determine what kind of environmental testing should be done, and has hired the contractor to conduct most of the environmental testing. BGS will look to the Health Department to analyze all of the data from the health surveys, environmental testing, medical screening and other research to make informed recommendations about relocation of employees, renovation or other remediation that may be needed.

BGS stands ready to address any issue or need that is identified as a result of the health investigation. BGS is responsible for coordinating, allocating and designating uses of state-owned buildings.