



TO: Bennington State Office Building Stakeholder Team

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

Tasha Wallis, Commissioner
Department of Buildings and General Services

THROUGH: Charlie Gingo, Agency of Human Services
Bennington District Field Director

RE: Investigation Update

DATE: October 12, 2006

Background

In early June 2006, the Vermont Department of Health together with the Department of Buildings & General Services (BGS), began investigating 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.

Although the investigation is extensive, it is possible that the cause of sarcoidosis cases will not be found. We continue to advise any employee who has specific health concerns to consult with his or her own health care provider.

The following update and other detailed information on the investigation as it progresses is always available on the Health Department's website: *healthvermont.gov*, then select *Community Public Health*.

UPDATE - Interim Report & Recommendations

At the Oct. 5 meeting of the Building Stakeholder Team, Health Commissioner Sharon Moffatt presented detailed findings from *The Interim Report on the Investigation into Health Concerns Among Occupants of the Bennington State Office Building*.

In summary, the health survey of current employees found higher than expected rates of sarcoidosis, asthma and asthma-like symptoms among current building occupants. A visual inspection of the building found evidence of past water damage, and environmental sampling in the building found evidence of fungi and endotoxin (bacteria).

Although no conclusive evidence has been found to link health concerns with the building itself, the Health Department recommended further diagnostic work and likely renovation of the building – and relocation of employees while this is being done. BGS Commissioner Tasha Wallis presented plans in progress to relocate employees within 30 to 45 days. BGS has hired Ed Turbitt to work on the logistics of the move with Bennington State Office Building managers, and he will be attending the Oct. 12 meeting of the stakeholder team.

Health Survey – Former Employees

To date, the response rate has been about 25 percent for the surveys that were mailed to former employees (and contractors that could be identified) who worked more than 20 hours per week in the building as far back as 1994. However, there have been many returned as “undeliverable” and Health Department investigators have been working with AHS Field Director Charlie Gingo to find correct addresses. Surveys with updated addresses will be mailed out by Oct. 13.

Employee Medical Screening

The National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) is still on track to mail individual test results by approximately Oct. 20 to each of the 102 participants in the medical screening tests offered in September.

It is possible that some participants will learn from their test results that they may have undiagnosed asthma. 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 participated in the testing to share their results with their health care provider.

Health Department investigators will get the aggregate (group) results some time after participants get their individual results. The group findings should add detail to the information that is already known from the health survey of current employees.

Reimbursement for Costs Related to Employee Medical Screening

The Department of Human Resources has worked out an agreement with VSEA to enable employees to be reimbursed for certain out-of-pocket medical expenses related to their participation in the NIOSH health assessment survey. *Eligible employees* are those who work in the building and who participated in the NIOSH medical screening tests in September. Any eligible employee who chooses to visit a physician to discuss the results

of the NIOSH assessment can be reimbursed for their out-of-pocket expenses for that visit, subject to the following limitations:

- Employees in the SelectCare plan would be eligible for reimbursement of the standard \$15 co-payment (even if they voluntarily choose to see an out-of-network provider and their actual expenses are therefore greater than the standard co-payment).
- Employees in the TotalChoice plan would be eligible for reimbursement for the patient share of the approved cost of the office visit (100 percent until the annual deductible has been met, and 20 after the deductible has been met).

These visits should take place within 60 days of receipt of the NIOSH assessment results, and the request for reimbursement should be submitted within 60 days following the visit. Details will be provided to each department about this process.