

Joint Terrorism Task Force Vermont



D/Sgt William Sweeny
Vermont State Police
Task Force Officer
Joint Terrorism Task Force

SA Mark Emmons
Assistant Weapons of Mass
Destruction Coordinator - Vermont
FBI Albany

*Vermont Emergency Preparedness
Conference - 09/06/2019*



UNCLASSIFIED



Presentation Overview

- FBI's Organization
- Joint Terrorism Task Force
- Ricin Overview
- Betty Miller Investigation
- Joint Investigations with Public Health
- Key Takeaways





FBI Worldwide Ops



-56 Field Offices

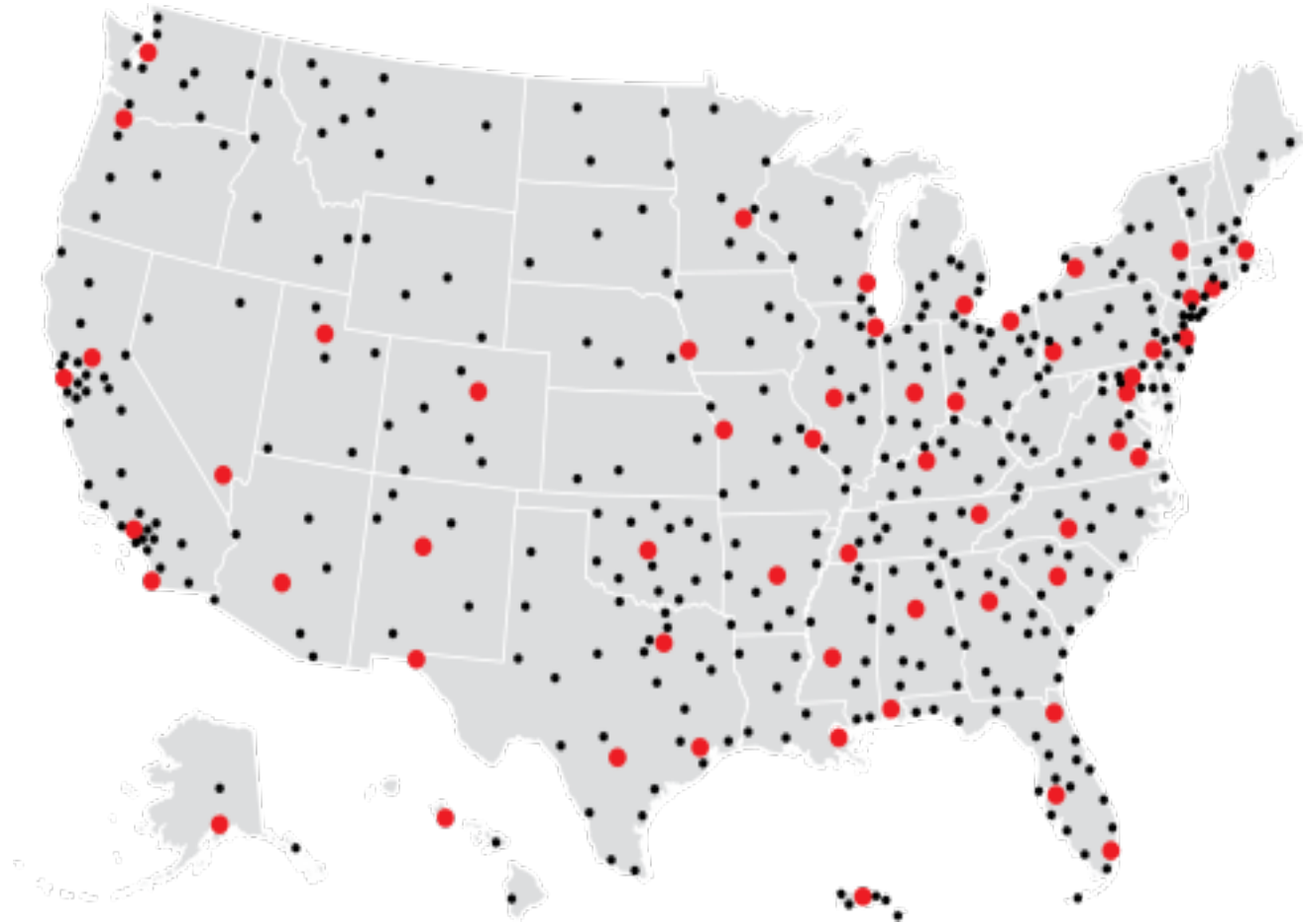
- Each with a JTTF, WMDC, SWAT, ERT, & SABT

-24 Hazardous Evidence Response Teams (HERTs);

-400+ Resident Agencies (RAs)

-FBI Headquarters Division Washington, DC/Quantico, VA

-64 LEGATs (3 WMDCs)





Albany Division Territory (2019)



32 of 62 of New York's (NY's) Counties (or 60% of NY's Geographical Region) & the State of Vermont (VT)





Joint Terrorism Task Force

- Cooperative effort
- Full-time members are full participants in cases, with equal clearances and accesses
- Local operational response
 - Familiarity before crisis
 - Shared intelligence base
- FBI is lead agency for incidents involving terrorism and WMDs





Weapons of Mass Destruction

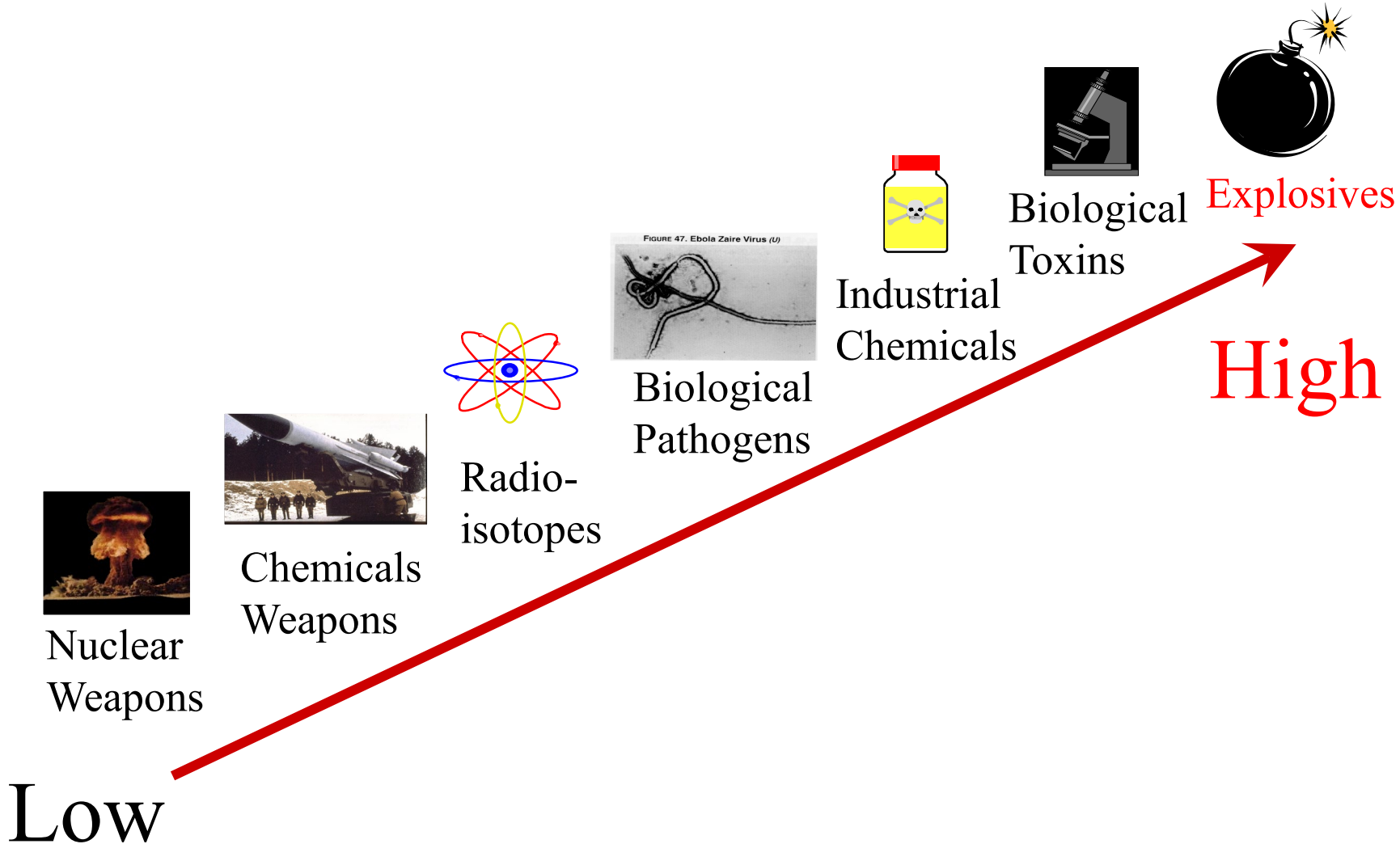
- Title 18 U.S.C. §2332a defines weapons of mass destruction (WMD) as:
 - Any explosive, incendiary, or poison gas
 - Any weapons that is designed or intend to cause death or serious bodily injury through the use of toxic or poisonous chemicals, or their precursors;
 - Any weapon involving a disease organism
 - Any weapon that is designed to release radiation or radioactivity at a level dangerous to human life

CBRNE = Chemical, Biological, Radiological, Nuclear, or Explosive





WMD Incident Threat Spectrum





Weapons of Mass Destruction Coordinator



- Local FBI WMD contact for state & local agencies
- Field office subject matter expert for WMD matters
- Key link between field office and FBIHQ
- Coordinate investigative response to WMD incidents
- Institute WMD countermeasures/tripwires
- Coordinate WMD training





FBI WMD Directorate Video



<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7UcTrmylnH8>





Biological Toxin - Ricin

Select Agents – A list of biological agents and toxins that have been determined to have the potential to pose a severe threat to both human and animal health, to plant health, or to animal & plant products.

Ricin (*Ricinus communis*)

- Highly toxic (70% more toxic than cyanide), no antidote (cyanide has an antidote);
 - Processed from castor beans to produce a powder;
 - Exposure Symptoms:
 - Within 24 hours; and
 - Respiratory distress, fever, cough
- Exposure Route :
- Injection, inhalation, ingestion





How to Make Ricin

- Instructions from online source
 - Castor beans
 - Soak beans in water & lye
 - Remove seed coats
 - Mix bean pulp and acetone in blender/grinder
 - Filter mixture with coffee filter/cheese cloth
 - Dry resulting solid
 - Repeat to refine...





Wake Robin

Exclusive, vibrant non-profit Life Plan Community (also known as a Continuing Care Community), located on 136 acres in Shelburne, VT which opened in 1993.





Betty Jean Miller

- 70 years-old (06/30/1947)
- Divorced with a son in VT & daughter in WY (Ex –Husband in NH)
- Lived alone at Wake Robin Apt 110 for past three (3) years
- Maine Driver License (Lived in Bangor previously)
- Well-liked and sociable
- History of depression and self-harm (Cutting and burning/Amputated 3 fingers with a jigsaw)
- No criminal history
- College educated (Retired Occupational Therapist; Ex –husband was a Physician)





Initial Events

- On 11/27/2017 (Monday), Miller informs psychiatrist of suicidal thoughts and ricin poisoning of self and others (Miller on anti-depressant drugs). Miller self-admitted to the University of Vermont (UVM) Medical Center.
- Psychiatrist advises Wake Robin staff of the ricin and they secure Miller's apartment that night (11/27/2017); Wake Robin staff contacted Shelburne PD on 11/28/2017 (Tuesday); Shelburne PD then alert Shelburne FD, VHMRT & VSP
- It is learned that Miller self-admitted UVM Medical Center after ingesting ricin on an earlier occasion and was diagnosed with pneumonia.





FBI Response

- On 11/28/2017, SA Stewart calls A/WMDC SA Mark Emmons (BURA) to confer with Shelburne PD.
- Shelburne PD on-scene with Shelburne FD, VSP, 15th CST, and VHMRT at Wake Robin Senior Living Facility advise that resident Betty Jean Miller made statements about poisoning other residents with ricin she had placed in multiple servings of residents' food over a period of several weeks.





Initial Search of Residence 11/28/2017



- Bottles marked “Ricin”, “Apple Seed”, “Cherry Seed”, “Yew Seed”, and “Castor Beans” and instructions on ricin production
- Lye, acetone, mortar & pestle, and coffee filters (No coffee grinder or blender)
- Ricin transported by VHMRT to VT DOH (LRN) who confirmed as ricin on 11/29/2017

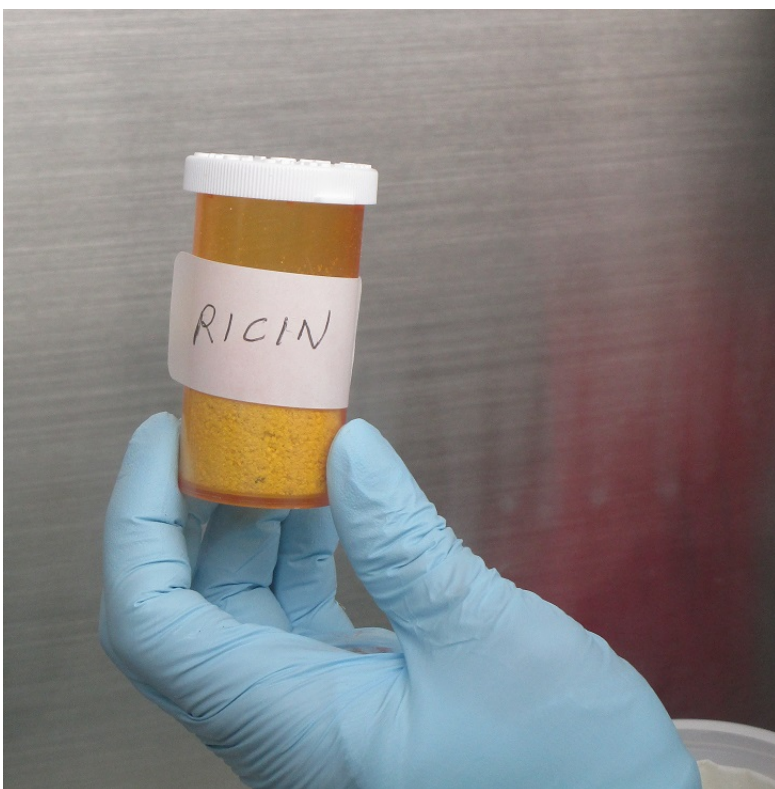




Initial Search of Residence 11/28/2017



- Bottle marked "Ricin" by Miller





Threat Credibility Evaluation (TCE)

...to conduct a timely **Threat Credibility Evaluation (TCE)** in order to:

- (1) Assess the credibility of the WMD threat
- (2) Determine the likelihood that the threat will result in substantial loss of life and damage to property
- (3) When necessary, consider initiation of the appropriate WMD search or response protocols
- (4) Provide a course of action support





Two (2) TCEs & an e-TCE

- On 11/28/2017, a TCE was conducted with WMDD ORU & BCU, CIEDU, ERTU, LD SRAU & THRU, VT DOH, VHMRT, 15th CST, and AL JTTF for coordination of SWs of Miller's residence and vehicle on 11/30/2017.
- On 11/29/2017, a TCE was conducted with WMDD ORU & BCU, CIEDU, ERTU, LD SRAU & THRU, VT DOH, VHMRT, 15th CST, VT USAO, BS HERT, and AL JTTF for submission of evidence to NBFAC from 11/30/2019 SWs of Miller's residence and vehicle.
- On 12/04/2017, an e-TCE (Electronic TCE aka Email) was conducted for blender submission to NBFAC.





Post-TCE Plan of Action



- Ensure public safety
 - Secure residence
 - Secure car (Negative results)
 - Victim interviews w/ VT DOH
- Interview Miller
 - FBI & Vermont Department of Health (VT DOH)
- Search residence
 - Deploy HERT (BS, NK, NY, and AL HERC)
- Coordinate with VT U.S. Attorney's Office
- Confirmation testing by LRN (Gold standard)



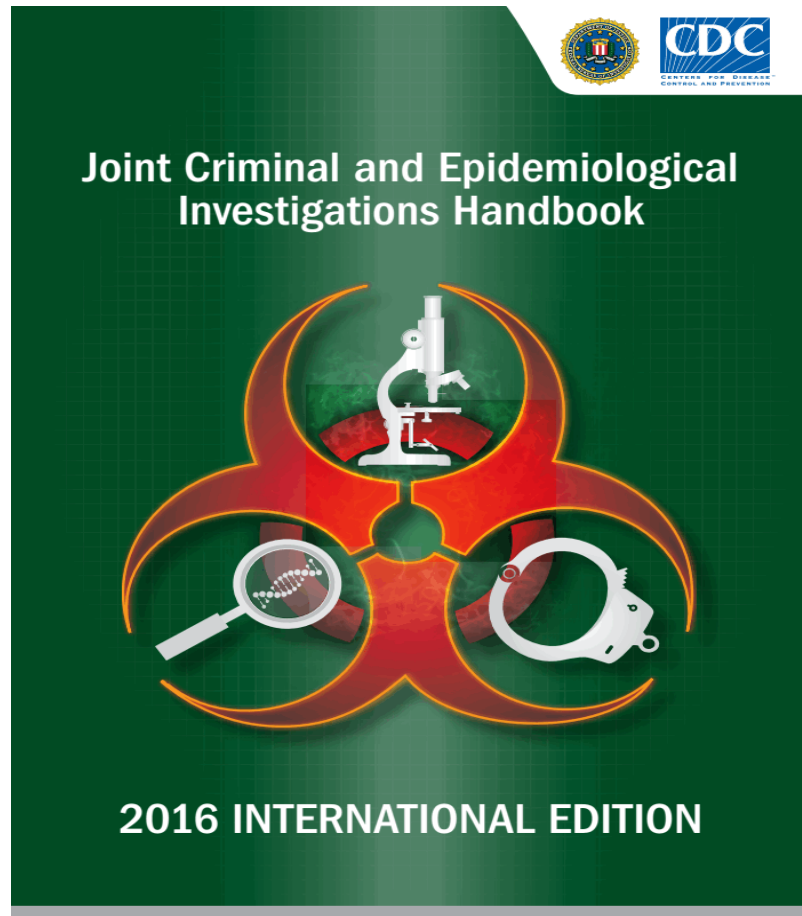
FBI
LABORATORY





Criminal-Epidemiological (“Crim-Epi”) Investigation

- Joint FBI and Public Health Investigations
- Shared Objectives
 - Ensure public safety
 - Identify Threat
 - Prevent Spread
 - Prevent Panic
 - Prosecution





Crim-Epi Interview of Miller (FAHC 11/28/2017)

- Miller admitted to making a total of 1-2 tablespoons of ricin on two (2) separate occasions from castor beans (Plants obtained from Wake Robin garden) to self-test and test on others (Miller was interviewed earlier in day by VSP)
- Miller began researching ricin via Internet on her laptop in Summer 2017 to include plant poisons derived from fox glove leaves and apple/cherry/yew seeds. Focused on ricin since most toxic.





Crim-Epi Interview of Miller (FAHC 11/28/2017)

- Miller placed ricin on pizza at a welcome to new residents party in her apartment, on eggs benedict in Wake Robin's main dining facility during a Sunday dinner, and in a resident's tea.
- Since there were no ill effects, Miller tried making cyanide from apple seeds and placed on buffet items in Wake Robin's main dining facility on 11/26/2017 (Thanksgiving was 11/23/2017).



© Simply Recipes





Crim-Epi Interview of Miller (FAHC 11/28/2017)

- Miller's goal was self-harm, but wanted to test on others first. Quality of life declined after a stroke the previous year.
- No one assisted Miller with production of ricin/cyanide in her kitchen; took no safety precautions since she did not care about her life or others.
- Castor seeds obtained from plants on grounds of Wake Robin (Communal Garden).





Vermont Health Advisory



Health Advisory
November 28, 2017

TO: Chittenden County Health Care Providers, Hospitals, Ambulatory Care Centers,
EMS Providers

FROM: Mark Levine, MD, Commissioner of Health

Possible Ricin Exposure

A field test performed by the Vermont State Hazardous Materials Response team (HAZMAT) today identified ricin at Wake Robin, a Shelburne retirement community. Confirmatory testing at the Vermont Department of Health Laboratory was also positive for Ricin toxin. Ricin is believed to have been processed, from castor beans, by a resident. That individual is hospitalized at the University of Vermont Medical Center, not necessarily for ricin poisoning. Law enforcement officials are investigating the incident.

Symptoms of ricin poisoning develop rapidly after exposure. No other possibly ill individuals have been identified, nor are expected, based on the last possible date of exposure on Sunday, November 26.

What is Ricin?

Ricin is an extremely toxic poison found naturally in castor beans. Ricin can be made from the waste material left over from processing castor beans and then purified, and treated to form a powder that can be inhaled or ingested.





Ricin Production Timeline



- 1st Batch (Sep-Oct 2017) – Less refined (~2 Tablespoons)
 - Using mortar & pestle, ingested “mash” and then began refining process after obtaining on-line instructions
 - “Floor Party” in her apartment to welcome 15-20 new residents where Miller sprinkled on pizza which was consumed (Sep-Oct 2017)
 - Miller inquired if anyone was sick afterwards
- 2nd Batch (Nov 2017) – More refined (~1 Tablespoon)
 - Inhaled this time as opposed to ingesting
 - Eggs Benedict at a Sunday buffet dinner in the common dining area (~11/19/2017)
 - Tea of Marjorie Flory (11/26/2017)





Who was involved?

- **FBI Albany JTTF (ERT/HERC)**
 - WMDC and A/WMDCs (BURA & PLRA)
 - VSP
 - DHS-CBP
 - USAO-District of VT
- VT DOH
- Shelburne FD & PD
- VHMRT
- 15th CST (South Burlington, VT)
- **FBI Headquarters**
 - WMDD ORU/OIU and BCU
 - Laboratory Division (LD) - SRAU and THRU
 - ERTU
 - CIEDU
- **FBI Field Offices**
 - HERT BS, NK & NY
 - BS Ex-husband Interview
 - SL Daughter Interview
 - TP Brother Interview





Arrest

Miller arrested on 11/30/2017 at FAHC via Criminal Complaint

Case 2:17-mj-00106-jmc Document 9 Filed 11/30/17 Page 1 of 1

AO 91 (Rev. 11/11) Criminal Complaint

UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT
for the
District of Vermont

U.S. DISTRICT COURT
DISTRICT OF VERMONT
FILED

2017 NOV 30 PM 3: 10

United States of America
v.

)
)
)
)
)
)

Case No.

2:17-MJ-106

CLERK
BY 
DEPUTY CLERK

Betty Miller

Defendant(s)

CRIMINAL COMPLAINT

I, the complainant in this case, state that the following is true to the best of my knowledge and belief.

On or about the date(s) of November 27, 2017 in the county of Chittenden in the
District of Vermont, the defendant(s) violated:

Code Section
18:175b(c), 42 CFR:73.3

Offense Description
Knowing possession of an unregistered biological agent where such agent is a select agent.





Texts from Miller to Webster



11/27/2017 (Monday) @ 2:28pm

“Help, I have a big problem and will be away for a few days. I hope hope hope that you can take Toby. I don’t know who else to turn to.”

11/27/2017 (Monday) @ 8:31pm

“I have psychiatric problems. Saw my shrink this afternoon and she wanted me to go into the psych unit of hospital ASAP. I am very unhappy about it. I have a room in the ER until a bed opens up in the psych unit...I would like to keep this quiet, thanks for taking Toby.”

11/29/2017 (Wednesday) @ 11:00am

“I must be the talk of Wake Robin now. I am not a villain! Needless to say I am extremely depressed.”





NBFAC (Fort Dietrick, MD)



- Initial (pre-TCE) search by VHMRT on 11/28/2017 led to submission of “ricin” bottle to VT DOH (Laboratory Response Network or RN) in Colchester, VT and ultimately to the National Bioforensic Analysis Center (NBFAC).
- Secondary (post-TCE) search headed by FBI BS HERT on 11/30/2017 led to submission of evidence to NBFAC; this included the blender seized on 12/05/2017.





Indictment & Plea Agreement



- On 12/14/2017, Miller was indicted on one (1) count of knowingly possessing an unregistered select agent (ricin) in violation of Title 18 U.S.C. Section 175b(c); 42 C.F.R. Section 73.3.
- On ~04/04/2018, Miller deemed both competent and sane, but a risk to herself and others.
- On 05/18/2018, Miller pled guilty to one (1) count of a superseding information charging her with knowingly possessing ricin in violation of Title 18 U.S.C. 175b(c).





Sentence



- Miller sentenced on 09/06/2018 to time served (9 months), 5 years probation, and fined \$10,000.
- Miller also required to seek regular mental health treatment; scheduled to receive outpatient therapy at Acadia Hospital in Bangor, ME.
- Miller agreed to pay nearly \$90,000 to Wake Robin for clean-up costs.





Crim-Epi Lessons (1 of 3)



- Use TCE to guide process, assign teams, etc.
- Work with all local/state/federal assets





Crim-Epi Lessons (2 of 3)



- Identify victims and circumstances (VT DOH checked for recent deaths at Wake Robin – All deemed due to natural causes)
- Areas of possible contamination
- Other potential storage locations (Refrigerators/trash containing left-over food)
- Identify useful evidence
- Motivations and intentions





Crim-Epi Lessons (3 of 3)



- Disseminate FBI literature on ricin so partners know what to look for now
- Miller's contract terminated with Wake Robin – Not allowed to return
- Miller currently receiving outpatient therapy at Acadia Hospital in Bangor, ME
- Arrested 08/20/2019 – probation violation





“What ifs”



- Ricin purity level was higher?
- Different route of exposure utilized?
- Miller hadn't confessed to her therapist?
- Miller hadn't answered investigators questions?

How long before someone questions deaths at Wake Robin?



QUESTIONS?

D/Sgt William Sweeny

Vermont State Police

FBI Albany – Vermont JTTF

802-657-6629

william.sweeny@vermont.gov

SA Mark Emmons

Assistant WMD Coordinator

FBI Albany – Vermont JTTF

802-657-6627

mcemmons@fbi.gov

