

Bloomfield Suicide Fits Unsettling Trend

Hydrogen Sulfide Poses Threat to First Responders

David Owens, Hartford Courant

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Bloomfield, CT – Sunday night or early Monday, a middle-aged woman parked her car in a secluded spot in Bloomfield, affixed signs to a window warning of poison gas, then breathed in hydrogen sulfide gas produced by a cocktail of common household chemicals in what appears to be Connecticut's first instance of "chemical suicide."

The woman lost consciousness and died. Her body was discovered Monday morning by a Bloomfield police officer after a passing railroad crew called police. Her death was ruled a suicide.

In the days since, emergency responders have been quietly warning each other about the hazards of dealing with such a suicide. First responders who fail to take proper precautions can quickly become victims themselves.

Hydrogen sulfide gas is highly toxic and can cause people without proper protective gear to lose consciousness and die. The gas's rotten egg odor also deadens the sense of smell, increasing the risk of poisoning.

"We have not seen this before locally, but there's a trend out there," said West Hartford Police Chief James Strillacci.

That trend began in Japan, where the practice has claimed more than 1,000 lives. Chemical suicide, also known as "detergent suicide," began to show up in the U.S. in mid-2008, first in California. It has gradually crept east.

Last week an incident was reported in New Jersey. In November, authorities in New York State issued a warning to first responders after two instances of chemical suicide upstate. In Missouri last month, four firefighters and the relative of a person who committed suicide were treated at a hospital after exposure to the gas. And in May, 18 people were sickened in Japan after a man killed himself.

Like the woman in Bloomfield, others committing chemical suicide have left signs warning first responders about the gas. But there is concern about the person who doesn't leave a note.

Several police and fire departments have warned employees about the practice and have given them advice on precautions to take.

"We've repeated those warnings with this incident so close to home," said Vernon police Lt. Brian Smith.