

## Toxic Stew of Household Chemicals Found With Dead Woman

By Stacy Davis and Erin Hartness, WRAL.com  
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Oxford, N.C. — Hazmat crews responded to an Oxford home late Sunday and evacuated nearby homes after authorities found a woman's body and a bucket of toxic chemicals inside a car.

Family members called authorities to 107 Hazelwood Court at about 10 p.m., where the car was parked behind the house. Oxford Police Chief John Wolford said a chemical mixture was on the seat near the body of Phillita Harris.

"Basically, we've determined that the chemical in the vehicle is some sort of household mix," Wolford said, adding authorities planned to test the mix to determine what it contained.



HAZMAT crews responded to 107 Hazelwood Court Sunday night, and authorities evacuated nearby homes, after a woman's body was found in this car with toxic chemicals on a seat near her. Photo by Stacy Davis, Capitol Broadcasting Company

Harris, 35, lived at the house with her son, who was not home at the time, police said. She was a second-grade teacher at Dabney Elementary School in Vance County but had been on medical leave for the past year, Vance County Schools officials said.

"The woman in the vehicle does not appear to have suffered any external wounds and at this time, the police investigation is simply being dubbed a death investigation," Wolford said.

Officers secured the scene and called for the Oxford Fire Department to investigate for hazardous material identification. The Raleigh Fire Department's Hazardous Materials Team was called for assistance.

More than one law enforcement officer opened the car door before authorities determined hazardous chemicals were inside, Wolford said.

"One of the Granville County sheriff's deputies felt some burning or discomfort in his throat and was transported to Granville Medical Center to be checked out," he said.

The unidentified deputy was treated at the hospital and released.

Hazmat officials at the scene said they responded to a similar scene less than a month ago in Cary, where a man killed himself in his car using a toxic mix of chemicals.

The technique, dubbed "detergent suicide," has been widespread in Japan for several years and began showing up in the U.S. in the last year or two, according to media reports.

"The idea that this is a potential method (of suicide) is concerning for everybody," Wolford said. "This is relatively new, so I think now we are going to clearly – as other agencies in our region have – look at this very differently."

One difference between the Cary and Oxford cases, Wolford said, was that there was no note warning first responders of the presence of toxic chemicals in the latest case.

"There's a big concern, obviously, for my guys who are responding, and we want to be as safe as we can," said Capt. Ian Thoms, hazmat coordinator for the Raleigh Fire Department. "There's also a concern for the general public who are not aware of this information."

Fumes released by opening the door to a car or a room where someone has carried out a "detergent suicide" are unlikely to kill a bystander, Thoms said, but they could make someone sick. Anyone who sees a situation they believe to involve such a suicide should call 911 immediately, he said.

"Keep everybody away. Call 911. Get help there as quick as possible and just stay away and just observe the situation," he said.

Source: <http://www.wral.com/news/local/story/7233421/>