

First Responders to Suicide Attempts Face New Dangers

By Keith Morelli | The Tampa Tribune

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As St. Petersburg firefighters and paramedics approached the car in a residential area over the weekend in response to a suicide call, they caught a whiff of some strange smelling gas and noticed the car was filled with smoke.



Fire & Rescue Lt. Joel Granata said another agency forwarded an e-mail to St. Petersburg firefighters on Jan. 27 telling them about "detergent suicide." Firefighters encountered their first case this weekend.

But what really got their attention were the five signs on the windows. "Stay Away." "Contact Haz-Mat."

It didn't take long for them to figure out this was more than a carbon monoxide poisoning. They had a real live dangerous situation here. They backed off and donned full protective clothing and self contained breathing devices. They pulled a 23-year-old man from inside the car. They were not able to revive him.

A police officer who helped drew a lungful of the concoction near the car and felt lightheaded. He was taken to a nearby hospital where he was treated and later released.

The call illustrates a new problem first responders are facing these days. Diving into unknown situations to help people may endanger their own lives.

It turns out the gas in the car was a custom-made combination of pesticides and cleaning products that the man in the car learned about from the Internet.

Japanese media recently has reported on a rash of suicides of young people there in which common cleaning products are mixed together to create a quick-acting poisonous gas.

St. Petersburg officials say this is the first case of this kind in the city.

Fire & Rescue Lt. Joel Granata said another agency forwarded an e-mail to St. Petersburg firefighters on Jan. 27 telling them of this new method of suicide, which can injure and maybe even kill first responders who go in unprotected.

"This whole thing transpired in Japan where they had 3,000 suicides last year," he said. Japanese officials say that about 500 of that total used this type of lethal brew.

"They call it detergent suicides," Granata said. A combination of bath beads or dish detergent along with some sort of acid can emit a toxic gas, he said. Once mixed, he said, the person passes out and the heart stops within minutes.

"You can just mix it up in a bucket right there in the car," Granata said.

In Japan, suicide victims have placed signs on windows of their cars warning first responders, he said.

"It's extremely, extremely toxic," he said.

In the weekend incident, the victim put five placards around the car to warn first responders, Granata said.

"We knew when we saw the signs that this was unusual," he said.

Information on such trends gets to departments around the world through several first responder organizations, said Tampa Fire Rescue Capt. Bill Wade. Suicide victims typically have left warning signs for first responders, he said.

"We wonder when the first time will be when they don't put up a sign or when someone will intentionally not put that note up just to harm first responders," Wade said.

He said the first line of defense is the 911 suicide call. If 911 operators sense there may be toxic gas involved, they have to relay that to the first responders, he said.

That will caution firefighters or paramedics from going right in.

"The typical response is to rush in to help out no matter what the situation is," Wade said. But in situations like this, "the first responder, police officer, firefighter or paramedic could be seriously injured or even end up dead."

Source: <http://www2.tbo.com/content/2010/feb/15/first-responders-suicide-attempts-face-new-dangers/life-health/>