

Employee taken to hospital after second Honeywell leak

By **AMY WOLD**
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Just a few hours after a citizens group released monitoring data on the July 20 chlorine leak at Baton Rouge's Honeywell plant, emergency crews again responded to a leak there Tuesday.

According to the Louisiana Department of Environmental Quality, a container at the Lupine Avenue plant sprung a leak while being filled with antimony pentachloride, a corrosive chemical that can burn the skin; irritate the nose, mouth, throat and lungs; and cause headaches and nausea.

Escaped gas from the leak, which occurred at about 1:30

p.m., sent one employee to the hospital in guarded condition, said Fire Department spokesman Howard Ward.

Monitors found no evidence of exposure outside the facility, and the plant was declared safe within an hour of the leak, Ward said.

Nine days earlier, eight plant workers were hospitalized after a chlorine leak at about 3:30 a.m. Area residents were told to shelter in place; some went to the hospital for treatment, complaining of difficulty breathing. By 7 a.m., Honeywell officials had given the all-clear signal for air quality.

On Tuesday, Honeywell representatives couldn't be reached for comment.

Meanwhile, members of the Louisiana Bucket Brigade, a group formed in 2000 that teaches residents to take air samples, released data from two air samples taken during the July 20 chlorine release.

Sonjya Thomas, who lives on Baton Rouge Avenue, said her mother woke up at about 3 a.m. Sunday because something "didn't smell right."

"About 3:30 a.m., we heard the intercom system," Thomas said. "You could hear them say, 'Turn the air conditioning off,' but you could already smell it." It smelled like a combination of chlorine and sulfur, she said.

Five weeks earlier, Thomas was one of six people in the neighborhood who learned how to use a bucket monitoring system that takes in air samples for testing.

Thomas said while she and her mother got dressed to leave the house, she prepared the monitoring kits but was stopped at the front door because of a chemical odor. She said what she breathed burned her lungs.

"I was crying because it was burning, and I was scared," Thomas said. She took a sample inside the house and then another one outside the house before she and her mother went to the hospital.

"Until you actually live in it and been in it, you don't actually know the fear," Thomas said. Of the six people who learned to use the air-monitoring system, Thomas was the only one to get samples.

Anne Rolfes, director of the Louisiana Bucket Brigade, said the testing results found nine chemicals that can cause a variety of health problems at different exposures. They include skin irritation, headaches and dizziness, respiratory problems, tremors and cardiac arrest.

However, the amounts detected by the Bucket Brigade were small and didn't include sampling or testing for chlorine, the chemical involved in the July 20 leak, two scientists said Tuesday.

Louis Thibodeaux, a chemical engineering professor at LSU, said it appears that the chemicals, and the amount of those chemicals, found in the samples taken by the citizens group were relatively common to Baton Rouge.

"Some of them could very well come from inside the house," he said. "Baton Rouge air has these things in the background levels."

For example, the Bucket Brigade air sample found 0.005 parts per million of methylene chloride, which can burn the skin

and eyes, cause shortness of breath and is considered a carcinogen that may damage the liver, kidneys and brain. However, standards from U.S. Occupational Safety and Health Administration allow for 25 parts per million during an eight-hour work shift as acceptable.

DEQ senior environmental scientist Jim Hazlett agreed that the levels shown in the testing results are well below the standards set by DEQ and the federal Agency for Toxic Substance Disease Registry. He said DEQ used chlorine-sensitive monitors and didn't find any readings more than the OSHA standard of 1 part per million for an eight-hour exposure.

However, Rolfes said, just because a chemical exposure is small doesn't mean it won't affect people.

Rolfes said there's a difference between monitoring for chemicals at levels that will do serious, immediate harm and monitoring for chemicals at lower levels that could have long-term effects.

Rolfes said she would be sending the Bucket Brigade's testing results to Honeywell, the U.S. Chemical Safety and Hazard Investigation Board, which is developing a report about the July 20 leak, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and DEQ.

Although other testing was done, Rolfes said, there hasn't been anything released to the public about exposure from the July 20 leak. "There's a glaring lack of information here and a real problem."

Rolfes said the samples raise a number of questions, including the short-term and long-term effects of chemical exposure, the effect of multiple chemical exposures and the feasibility of sheltering in place when houses aren't airtight.



Advocate staff photo by Travis Spradling

Anne Rolfes, director of the Louisiana Bucket Brigade, discusses the chemicals found in the air samples taken by Baton Rouge resident Sonjya Thomas at her home during a chemical leak at nearby Honeywell International on July 20. Thomas is in the background.

