

Article published Apr 17, 2010

Durham center reopens after months of closure from anthrax

DURHAM — The beat is back at The Waysmeet Center.

Students and staff were able to re-enter the center on Friday, nearly four months after anthrax was detected and a Strafford County woman fell gravely ill after attending a Dec. 4 drum circle. The center houses the United Campus Ministry at the University of New Hampshire.

Just after noon, the Rev. Larry Brickner-Wood, the ministry's executive director, signed an order releasing the building from the Department of Health and Human Services back to the ministry. Then he turned his attention to peeling away months-old duct tape around the quarantine order on the front door.

"We're absolutely certain it's safe to enter," said Dr. Jodie Dionne-Odom, the deputy state epidemiologist.

Inside, tables, chairs and a West African Djembe Drum were stacked in the middle of the community room. Visitors, including a handful of reporters, were met by the smell of cleaning agents that dissipated once a few windows were cracked.

"It's nice to see some drums," the Rev. Brickner-Wood said.

It wasn't long before he was prodded to pick up the drum. Ministry drummers typically don't play solo since the circles are a community affair — more ritual than performance — but the beat had returned.

Life was getting back to normal, and the eight students who live there were eager to get back to their rooms.

"It's been a tough ordeal," the Rev. Brickner-Wood said. "Not as tough for us as the young woman, but she's recovering ... and we're so thankful for that."

State and federal officials became aware of the woman's condition just before Christmas. She recently returned home from the hospital, and she's "walking around and talking and able to answer questions, and that's wonderful," Dionne-Odom said. It's too early, however, "to say for sure what her long-term" prognosis will be.

Environmental cleanup teams scrubbed the entire building between March 22 and April 14. Anthrax spores were found throughout the building, including on electrical outlets and two animal hide-covered drums that carried the naturally occurring anthrax.

The drum that tested positive for the same anthrax that infected the woman was "beheaded," scrubbed with special solution and discarded, Dionne-Odom said.

Dionne-Odom said the cleanup took longer than anticipated because of the rarity of the event. "If you look at the reports for gastrointestinal anthrax in the United States you find nothing," she said.

Officials still believe the woman swallowed anthrax spores during a "brief aerosolization" event amid "vigorous drumming," Dionne-Odom said. It remains unclear why the woman did not contract inhalation anthrax, which also can be fatal, she said. About 80 other people were present that

night.

The Rev. Brickner-Wood praised federal and state officials for their assistance. Now that the center has reopened, "we'll be doing what we've always been doing," including operating the Cornucopia Food Pantry there, he said.

The infected woman did not regularly attend drum circles there but "she, like anyone, is always welcome and if she wants to be here we'd love to have her," he said.

The Rev. Brickner-Wood did not hide his displeasure with Church Mutual Insurance Company, which insures the center.

"Their behavior has been reprehensible in the whole process and they're not covering a thing and they should be ashamed of themselves," he said.

The cleanup cost \$50,000 but the entire ordeal cost about \$90,000 between damaged computers, furniture and piano, the Rev. Brickner-Wood said. "We're still challenging the insurance company about their denial of coverage," he said. "Essentially they're saying there was bacteria and they don't cover bacteria."

The Rev. Brickner-Wood said he isn't worried people will stay away for fear of contamination.

"Some people may never come back or never come in. I suspect the folks who have been here will come back," he said.