

Illness forces relocation of Red Cross headquarters

An airborne fungus may have sickened many Minneapolis Red Cross workers - at least three with serious liver ailments - and the agency decided Thursday to move immediately from its headquarters at the edge of downtown.

Today the 75 employees will relocate temporarily to the Dayton Hudson Operations Center near Interstate Hwy. 394 and Hwy. 100 in Golden Valley. Employees were informed Thursday afternoon and were told to collect personal items before leaving for the day.

Officials said it will take about \$1 million to fix the problem over the next year. The Red Cross will continue to offer all services through its five branch offices, but some work may be interrupted until the move is completed, they said.

There have been no scientific links between the fungus - *Stachybotrys atra* - and human health problems, a consultant for the Red Cross said.

"But there have been links with animal health problems," including liver cancer, cirrhosis, respiratory ailments and death,

said Charles Lane, vice president for Environmental Process of Minneapolis, which has been examining the Red Cross building.

"The health and safety of our employees is our top concern and we don't want to take any chances," said Marion Adcock, chief executive officer of the 80-year-old Minneapolis chapter of the American Red Cross.

Seven employees, including the three with liver problems, filed workers' compensation claims after becoming ill this summer. The liver ailments are "very serious," but apparently do not include cancer, Adcock said. She would not say if any of the seven have been hospitalized or are missing work now.

There have been complaints about air quality since 1990, and many employees - including Adcock - have suffered from respiratory or allergy-type ailments such as scratchy throat, burning eyes, fever and headache.

The Red Cross took 18 recommended actions in 1991 and replaced the heating and ventilation system in 1993 in an effort to fix the problem. But complaints continued and the fungus was discovered in December, when Environmental Process was brought in. Lane said the fungus initially was thought to be confined to a small area of the 30,000-square-foot building near Loring Park.

However, last week it was found to permeate large areas of two additions that constitute two-thirds of the building. The fungus thrives on wet building material such as wallboard, ceiling tiles and carpeting.

Adcock said no employees have filed lawsuits over their illnesses.

It is unclear if insurance will cover some of the fixup costs.

The Red Cross might seek some payment from previous contractors if their work failed to identify or even worsened the problem.

Although Dayton Hudson donated 15,000 square feet of space for up to eight months, "we are in the unusual position of having to hold out our hands and ask for help from the community," Adcock said. The agency is looking for expertise in moving and setting up its computer network and donations of laptop computers and money.

The Minneapolis chapter, with a \$4.4 million annual budget, provides disaster relief, first aid and AIDS education, swimming lessons and more than 800 other volunteer services in Hennepin, Anoka and Scott counties. Its phone number, 871-7676, will no change with the move.

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