ST. LOUIS/TUESDAY

Officer Questions Number Of Hospital Visits After Leak

By H.J. Jackson
Of the Post-Dispatch Staff

East St. Louis Mayor Carl E. Officer says he is suspicious that 254 area residents visited Metro East emergency rooms Sunday, complaining of effects from a brief chemical leak at a Monsanto Co. plant in Sauget.

Many went to the emergency rooms several hours after the leak was sealed, he said.

"I find it difficult to believe that many people were injured in a five-minute spill at 7:30 in the morning," Officer said Monday. "That would be fraud, wouldn't it? I find it very suspect."

Officer and some other city officials said they feared that some people who complained of illnesses after the leak might be trying to get compensation for non-existent injuries.

But they are instead hurting the credibility of people who have legitimate complaints, the officials said.

The leak occurred from about 7:35 a.m. to about 7:40 a.m. at Monsanto's W.G. Krummrich Plant, in Sauget. Monsanto representatives said about 48 pounds of phosphorous trichloride had escaped. The chemical, used in agriculture, can cause irritation to the eyes and respiratory system.

The company sounded its emergency sirens to alert nearby residents after the leak.

A spokeswoman for Monsanto said a pressure seal on a chemical tank had failed, allowing the chemical vapor to escape.

The vapor formed a white cloud that slowly moved to the northeast, into East St. Louis.

Officials from the Illinois Environmental Protection Agency visited the W.G. Krummrich plant Monday. They said a determination of the cause of the leak probably would take several days.

"Part of the investigation will be to see if the pressure disk failed or if the tank was overpressured," said Max McComb, the plant's superintendent of environmental affairs.

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>
> CARL E. OFFICER, Mayor of East St. Louis

Diane Bartolanzo, a spokeswoman for Monsanto, said the company planned to pay medical expenses for the people who visited the emergency rooms.

About 3,000 gallons of the same chemical spilled from a railroad car at the same Monsanto plant in April. Bartolanzo said the company had paid the medical bills and some compensation to residents who complained of illness from that incident.

"That was a much greater spill," she said. "The EPA doesn't require us to report an emission until it reaches 1,000 gallons. We sounded the alarm (Sunday) as a precaution."

East St. Louis Emergency Services and Disaster Director George Foster submitted a report Monday to Officer noting that emergency alarms went off at 7:32 a.m. Sunday. City officials were notified at 7:39 a.m. The all-clear was sounded at 8:35 a.m., the report said.

Foster reported that when the all-clear sounded, just seven people had reported to St. Mary's Hospital in East St. Louis; one to Centreville Township Hospital in Alorton; and none to Gateway Community Hospital in East St. Louis.

But as of Monday morning, 160 people had reported to St. Mary's, and one was admitted; 70 had reported to Centreville Township Hospital, and two were admitted; and 24 had visited Gateway Community Hospital, where five were admitted. Those admitted to the hospitals were kept for observation. Most were released by late Monday. No one was seriously injured, authorities said.

Most people seeking treatment complained of eye, skin and respiratory irritation.

Lawrence Triplett, 80, a resident of the Rush City area at the south end of East St. Louis, said, "It missed Rush City; the wind didn't come this way."

But Bettie Lee Henley, one of Triplett's neighbors, said she had heard the warning siren and promptly called her daughter to take her from the area.

"I came back at noon" Sunday, Henley said. "I didn't know what it was. And whenever I call Monsanto and tell them I'm sick, they tell me to go to the hospital."

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