The Division of Fire Safety has received word that so-called “Suicide Bags” also known as “Exit Bags” have been discovered by responding emergency personnel. The use of a suicide bag is a method of committing suicide that is gaining in popularity due to the peaceful death that results, as described by the various advocacy groups that support legalized suicide. The device itself consists of a large plastic bag with a drawstring. It is usually used in conjunction with an inert gas such as helium or nitrogen, and in rare cases the flammable and explosive gases propane and butane. The use of one of these gases prevents the panic, sense of suffocation and autonomic struggling during unconsciousness usually caused by the deprivation of oxygen and high concentrations of carbon dioxide. This is known as the hypercapnic alarm response. Breathing in other gases in place of oxygen does not result in carbon dioxide being exhaled, thus suppressing the hypercapnic alarm response.

The typical suicide scenario involves the person obtaining a large plastic bag with a drawstring, a disposable tank of gas, most often helium; typically that found in commercially available party balloon kits, and some type of tubing or a hose. The person places the bag over the head, connects the tubing to the gas valve and places the discharge end into the bag allowing the flow of helium to displace the air in the bag. The person then tightens the drawstring around the neck to ensure a good seal. Typically within seconds, the person becomes unconscious due to oxygen deprivation (hypoxia) and as long as the gas keeps flowing and continues to exclude oxygen, death follows shortly thereafter. Two variations of this method are use of the bag alone without the gas that is usually preceded by the person taking a large quantity of sleeping pills or tranquilizers to suppress the hypercapnic alarm response; or use of the gas with a CPAP mask instead of the bag.

The NJ Division of Fire Safety recommends that:

- When responding to incidents such as this, responders are advised to utilize SCBA at least until a determination is made as to what type of gas was used and the premises is thoroughly ventilated. Oxygen (O₂) deficient atmospheres may exist so a multi-meter that measures O₂ should be used.
- Responders should be aware that there is a chance that propane or butane may have been used due to the easy availability of these gases in hardware and home improvement stores. Precautions should be taken to prevent ignition sources from coming into contact with any gas.
- Responders should be aware that variants of the suicide bag method may have been used that may include the mixing of household chemicals to create a poisonous gas such as hydrogen sulfide and take appropriate precautions to prevent exposure. (See Safety Alert 2010-1 at: http://www.state.nj.us/dca/divisions/dfs/alerts/)

Photos showing examples of a balloon party kit with helium tank (left), a demonstration of a suicide bag with drawstring (center), and detailed instructions from the internet on how to use a variant method using a CPAP mask (right).