

# **THE RED TAG NEWSLETTER NOVEMBER 2020**



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## **2020 CALENDAR OF EVENTS**

No Events currently planned due to COVID-19 issues

*Red Tag appreciates the support of its associate members: Crain Communications, Fry Communications, Imex Global Solutions, and LSC Communications.*

# A LOOK AT THE IG REPORT ON MAIL DELAYS – DELIVERY IMPROVEMENTS HAPPENING – PROBLEMS CONTINUE TO SURFACE – LATEST ACTION LEADS TO MORE OVERSIGHT – POSTMASTER GENERAL UNDER FIRE - HELP FROM THE INSIDE

## IG Report On Mail Delays

The main watchdog for the Postal Service, the Office of the Inspector General, found that the Postal Service failed to examine the consequences of changes implemented this summer, ultimately leading to significant mail delays.

The Inspector General faulted the agency for launching operational changes without studying or analyzing the impacts of those changes and failed to notify mailers and consumers of the plans. This exacerbated operational and delivery issues already brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic.

The report also cited USPS for inadequately communicating these plans to mailers and consumers, leading to widespread confusion and varying degrees of inconsistent implementation and compliance.

Postmaster General Louis DeJoy has acknowledged that these reforms, which stressed operating all parts of the Postal Service on a set schedule while ending late and extra trips, have caused significant mail delays. Oddly enough he deflected blame for other changes that came to light after he was appointed. This includes significant increases in the removal of sorting machines and collection boxes around the country.

The Inspector General's report identified 57 different initiatives that the Postal Service deployed in Fiscal Year 2020 as part of an effort to slash 64 million work hours were minor but, when all deployed together caused significant delays and confusion.

A number of lawsuits were filed on behalf of commercial mailers and consumers and postal management responded by blaming the delays on operations at the local management level through either miscommunication or poor judgment instead of accepting the blame at the headquarters level.

It was determined that in as little as three weeks after the new Postal service policies were put into effect, mail delivery and processing delays spiked 143 percent. Auditors working for the Inspector General described these initiatives as being designed to eliminate late and

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Extra trips as well as overtime associated with them, although postal management says this is not so. The Inspector General criticized the implementation of these reforms without first piloting them, particularly because the agency was already facing critical employee availability issues due to the pandemic.

The Inspector General said that “given the challenges resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic, including reduced employee availability, increased package volumes and a heightened focus on voting by mail, these operational initiatives should have been analyzed and evaluated ahead of deployment to fully understand the impact of implementation.”

Removal of mail sorting equipment nearly doubled in fiscal 2020 compared to previous years.

The USPS Board of Governors disagreed and said that these changes were routine and not transformational, and therefore it faced no obligation to disclose them to Congress. The Board of Governors went on to say in a statement, “While we appreciate the ongoing efforts of the OIG to help the Postal Service improve operations, we do not agree with the premise that underlies that report: that the initiatives reviewed are strategic in nature, or that they are transformational to postal operations, either individually or collectively.”

The Inspector General stressed that what the Postal Service identified as “routine” had not been pursued at the same speed or consistency in previous years. The auditors did find that the Postal Service was correct in concluding it did not have to receive approval for its changes from the Postal Regulatory Commission (PRC). It also cleared DeJoy of any ethical wrongdoing in the review it has conducted so far, but noted that some of his accounts still must be examined.

Mr. DeJoy has frequently cited previous IG reports that identified opportunities for savings that justified his initiatives, however, the auditors pushed back on the suggestion that the two perspectives aligned.

The Inspector General writes that “while our reports have identified opportunities for cost control and improved efficiency, our recommendations did not prescribe implementation strategies that would have significant negative services impacts.”

## USPS Delivery Is Improving

With all the efforts to delay mail delivery either halted or on indefinite hold, the Postal service is beginning to show fruit for its work. The week ending October 3rd, on time delivery of First-Class Mail was 86.2 percent. The on-time numbers from two weeks ago were at 84.2 percent. It is definitely encouraging to see this uptick in on-time delivery but there is still a long way

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to go to get back to where the levels were before the COVID-19 pandemic. On time hovered at an average of 93 percent.

Federal judges have sided against the policies of senior postal management in every case handled so far. This has led to injunctions against those policies and many of them have been walked back.

Recent improvements began in earnest after the Postal Service issued an all employee memorandum on September 21 clarifying that the agency would abide by the court order, including approving all overtime as necessary to deliver election mail in a timely fashion and reversing the push to eliminate late and extra trips to accommodate mail volume fluctuations.

This has been a huge victory for states and for advocacy groups concerned about the impact on a significantly larger vote-by-mail volume, and in fact, there were a record number of vote-by-mail ballots. The Postal Service had processed and delivered 98 percent of election mail on time as the end of the week of October 2<sup>nd</sup>. This is up from 94 percent two weeks earlier.

Committee Democrats will continue to monitor the situation, staffers said as recent fluctuations in performance has been noticed over the past couple of weeks and remains a cause for concern.

House Democrats say that there is a definite causation between court-based decisions and recent improvements in service.

Between the court orders, continued public pressure and the settlement of seven separate legal actions by states,

the causation between these issues and the delivery of mail has become clear in that many of these recent decisions by the Postal Service have been halted or reversed.

Clearly there are multiple factors in play right now because of the revolving employee shortage and distress because of COVID-19. In response to these concerns, and after a subsequent additional court order, the Postal Service took steps to expand transportation networks after October 1 to respond to the ongoing issues and ensure timely delivery of ballots.

## Yet Problems Have Cropped Up Again

On October 27, only one week before the general election, it appeared that evidence showed that there were slowdowns in delivery at 28 of 29 critical areas for election issues. While delivery is slowly returning to normal around most of the country these sites considered political "battleground" sites are experiencing delivery delays ranging from 43.0 percent in Philadelphia to 62.9 percent in South Florida.

Inbound ballot mail was at 95 percent and outbound was 89 percent so there is no discernible reason why these particular cities should be seeing these delays. Another court filing was submitted the morning of October 28. Consumers were advised to take ballots to election offices or drop boxes.

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As a last resort, people were told to get a provisional ballot then and complete, sign and deliver right at the site.

Unfortunately, this is revenue lost to the Postal Service that is sorely needed right now.

## Additional Court Oversight Mandated

Further action was taken by Federal courts on the night of October 27 to mandate Postmaster General Louis DeJoy until Wednesday morning, October 28, to inform workers of court mandates and to enforce compliance with other recent rulings.

All management staff were advised by 9:00am on the morning that July guidelines established by the office of the Postmaster General have been rescinded regarding late and extra trips and necessary overtime as needed.

“USPS personnel are instructed to perform late and extra trips to the maximum extent necessary to increase on-time mail deliveries, particularly for Election Mail.” The judge went on to state, “to be clear, late and extra trips should be performed to the same or greater degree than they were performed prior to July 2020 when doing so would increase on-time mail deliveries.”

The judge, Emmet Sullivan, further instructed the Postal Service to send him daily updates on the number of extra and occurring every day at national, regional and local levels, in

addition to information about on-time deliveries. And, starting Wednesday, the agency and the plaintiffs who sued the Postal Service will meet in a daily video conference to discuss status updates of how the agency is complying with Judge Sullivan’s order.

## Regular Staff Continues To Combat Problems

During the changes implemented by Postal Service senior management, regular staff were quietly, and sometimes not so quietly, combatting these problems.

There were numerous instances of clerks, carriers and mail handlers, as well as maintenance staff and mid and lower level management reacting to what amounts to the failure of the primary mission of the Postal Service; to deliver mail accurately and within service guidelines.

There have been documented reports of maintenance staff and electronics technicians reassembling and re-installing sorting equipment where the bottom has fallen out of delivery standards.

There are numerous cases of carriers and others working on their own time to get election mail and prescription medicines delivered on their routes after regular hours on their own time.

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## Domestic Mail – 207.3.3 – Permissible Components Refresher

Until such time as USPS gets back to more normal, hopefully in a time where COVID-19 is under control, This page will have refreshers on things we should already know but may be subject to the kind of forgetfulness that can accompany these stressful times. I hope this helps keep all of us on top of the game.

### **PERIODICALS PAGES – DMM 3.31**

Pages are made up of printed sheets that form a publication or a component of a publication. They are assembled as unbound or bound.

Unbound pages are generally folded sheets, nested in one another to, form a complete issues or as loose-leaf pages in publications that are update by the deletion or insertion of new pages from time to time.

Bound publications are pages held together by staples, glue or any other acceptable means of permanently assembling them to form a complete publication. Wire bound or stapled are considered saddle stitched issues while glued versions are considered perfect bound.

Components added to these issues are assembled by the same methods. However, if the material inserted has dimensions larger than the host publication, these insertions must be folded to fit.

### **PERIODICALS PAGES – PARTS AND SECTIONS - DMM 3.32**

These are pages that comprise physically separate subdivisions of the publication, as identified by the publisher. These appear more often in newspapers (unbound publications) than other bound titles.

Each part or section must show the publication title and the number of parts or section that make up the issue must appear on the cover or front page of the first part or section.

Parts or sections produced by someone other than the publisher may not be mailed at Periodicals rates of postage if they are prepared by or for someone other than the publisher if they are advertisers or if they are provided to the publisher free of charge or at a nominal charge. Parts and sections should belong to the publisher.

NOTE: Advertising sections and similar enclosures may be prepared and presented as supplements under mailing standards for supplements and may be subject to the advertising postage charge.

When and if requested, copies of contracts for the production of parts and sections must be provided to the appropriate Postal Service personnel.