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# Postal Service's cost cutting is frustrating Kentuckians — and raising election concerns

**Ben Tobin**

Louisville Courier Journal



LOUISVILLE, Ky. — Caleb Jenkins was accustomed to receiving his mail every day at his southern Louisville home. But on July 17, something strange happened: He and his wife didn't get any.

No white van with the familiar blue logo. No packages. No smiling mail carrier.

Just an empty mail box.

And it stayed empty.

For six consecutive days. In fact, the 30-year-old who works in the health care industry did not receive any deliveries from the U.S. Postal Service.

The next week saw deliveries without a hitch for the Jenkins household. But again this week, Jenkins had not received mail for two days. And with his wife having surgery in the middle of July, he has wanted to receive billing information in a timely manner.

"With medical bills and all those type of things coming in the mail, it's been really frustrating," Jenkins said.

Jenkins isn't the only Kentuckian who's frustrated. Residents from across the commonwealth are feeling the trickle-down effects of recent cost-saving measures at the Postal Service, an agency that has a deeply uncertain future as it awaits funding from an intransigent Congress.

And with a Nov. 3 general election that could heavily rely on mail-in ballots, the concerns of mail inefficiency may just be getting started — in Kentucky and around the nation.

**ICYMI:** Adams weighs scaling back mail-in voting eligibility for general election

## **Pivot to 'efficiency' amid financial ruin**

With roots in the Constitution, the Postal Service became an independent agency of the U.S. government's executive branch in 1971.

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But it has been struggling recently: Between 2007 and 2019, it lost roughly \$78 billion due to decreased mail volume and increased cost, according to a report released in May by the Government Accountability Office, a nonpartisan government watchdog agency.

Many of the costs incurred by the Postal Service are linked to the federal Postal Accountability and Enhancement Act passed in 2006, which requires the agency to make payments toward health benefits for future retirees decades in advance. The Postal Service is designated to be self-sustaining, meaning it receives no tax dollars to cover operations.

In late July, Postmaster General Louis DeJoy pointed to the financial woes as a cause for disruption in service, noting that the Postal Service is "in a financially unsustainable position, stemming from substantial declines in mail volume and a broken business model."

"We are currently unable to balance our costs with available funding sources to fulfill both our universal service mission and other legal obligations," said DeJoy, who was appointed to the position in May by President Donald Trump.

"Because of this, the Postal Service has experienced over a decade of financial losses, with no end in sight, and we face an impending liquidity crisis."

DeJoy added that the agency is "vigorously focusing on the efficiency of our operations." While he did not specify in his statement what that entailed, an internal memo obtained by USA TODAY reveals that carriers have been instructed not to make any late or extra trips — meaning some mail will be temporarily left behind at mail room facilities.

**Nationally:** Union warns of Postal Service cuts as states prepare for mail-in voting



## Trickle-down impact on Kentucky

The cost-cutting measures have created painful backlogs for myriad Kentuckians.

Dozens of Kentuckians told The Courier Journal this week that they have recently had difficulties both shipping and receiving packages and other mail.

Laura Haggarty, a 62-year-old from Pendleton County who sells greeting cards and other products on eBay and Etsy, has relied on the Postal Service to deliver products for decades. When products take a week or more to deliver than promised, "(it) creates a huge problem for me as a small-business person," she said.

"I can show people I dropped it off at the post office on this day, and it's sat at Cincinnati for a week and a half and I have no control over that," Haggarty said.

"But the customer doesn't care," she added. "And the risk that I run is that if I have a customer who is unhappy because they haven't received their item, and they leave me bad feedback, then that harms my business. And that's not OK."

Good feedback is crucial to online sellers' success, according to Haggarty, as a certain number of negative reviews can tank placement in a search engine.

And with other private shippers, such as FedEx or UPS, charging more to send products, shifting away from the Postal Service is just "not cost-effective," Haggarty said.

While Haggarty said she has only seen major issues after the appointment of DeJoy as postmaster general, Stephanie Bell said she has experienced difficulties with the Postal Service for a few years.

Bell, a 54-year-old from Lexington who works in the telecom industry, is a self-described post office supporter. However, after ordering a purse from Florida that has been sitting in a Postal Service facility in Cincinnati since July 30, she said she's tired of the delays.

"For the past two years, my mail is going to my neighbors' houses, their mail has been coming to mine," Bell said. "It just seems there's a tremendous lack of attention to detail by the post office."

When contacted by The Courier Journal about the impact of the cost-cutting measures on Kentucky operations, local postal spokeswoman Susan Wright referred a reporter to DeJoy's statement.

Art Campos, the president of American Postal Workers Union Louisville Local #4, which represents roughly 700 Postal Service workers in the area, said local delivery delays are due to DeJoy's directives.

"The changes he's making — they're filtering down to us where we're not catching up to it yet," Campos said.

Campos said he hopes Louisville postal workers will adjust and be "back on track" soon.

**See also:** [Breonna Taylor's name is a national rallying cry. Will it be enough?](#)

## **An uncertain financial future**

Amid the coronavirus pandemic, the Postal Service has received some aid in the form of a \$10 billion line of credit from the U.S. Treasury, which was authorized by Congress in March.

But without more federal relief, the agency projects that it could run out of cash by the middle of next year.

The future of the Postal Service is one of many things at play in COVID-19 relief negotiations between House Speaker Nancy Pelosi and Senate Minority Leader Chuck Schumer, two Democrats, and Treasury Secretary Steve Mnuchin, as well as White House Chief of Staff Mark Meadows, two Republicans.

Democrats have been pushing for \$25 billion for the Postal Service and included the funding in the Health and Economic Recovery Omnibus Emergency Solutions Act, or HEROES Act, a bill narrowly passed by the House of Representatives in May.

The Health, Economic Assistance, Liability Protection and Schools Act, or HEALS Act, Senate Republicans' alternative bill, does not include any money for the Postal Service.

Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell has not been in the latest negotiations. When asked if the Kentucky Republican supported additional funding for the Postal Service, McConnell spokesman Robert Steurer said that "negotiations are ongoing, and if he comments we'll let you know."

Campos said postal workers are essential workers, and that the \$25 billion in funding would "definitely help us provide this service."

**COVID-19 rules:** No Kentucky State Fair crowds. Masks. A bar curfew.



## What this means for mail-in ballots

Trump has criticized the Postal Service in the past, as well as the concept of mail-in voting — which has become more prevalent throughout the coronavirus pandemic.

Some critics of the president have suggested he appointed DeJoy — a North Carolina business executive, Trump ally and Republican Party megadonor — to deliberately undercut faith in the Postal Service and its ability to deliver mail, including ballots, in a timely fashion.

"The fact that Trump has appointed one of his cronies to manage this nationwide, huge conglomerate, who has no experience with this stuff, is just obscene," said Haggarty, the online seller.

DeJoy's recent changes to the Postal Service have earned him congressional attention, too. U.S. Sen. Gary Peters, a Michigan Democrat and the ranking member of the Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs



Committee, announced Thursday he has launched an investigation into reported mail delays at the Postal Service.

Though several Kentuckians told The Courier Journal they're concerned about mail-in ballots being delivered on time, Wright, the Postal Service spokeswoman, said the agency is committed to delivering all election mail in a timely manner.

"Despite any assertions to the contrary, we are not slowing down Election Mail or any other mail," she said in a statement. "Instead, we continue to employ a robust and proven process to ensure proper handling of all Election Mail consistent with our standards."



**Earlier:** Black voter turnout in Louisville increased in June primary

Meanwhile, Kentucky Secretary of State Michael Adams said the Postal Service's slowdown in delivering mail on time, in combination with roughly 5% of absentee ballots being rejected due to voter error in the



commonwealth's primary, are part of the reason he does not support universal mail-in voting again in November.

Adams, a Republican, pointed to an audit from the Office of Inspector General that found more than 4% of mail-in ballots in the 2018 midterm and special elections were not delivered on time.

"Apart from the logistical hurdle facing county clerks if we were to conduct another primarily mail-based election — with turnout predicted to be 250% higher in November than in June — I am not willing to see 1 out of 10 voters disenfranchised," Adams said in a statement.

He added that the November voting plan he will present to Kentucky Gov. Andy Beshear in the coming days will "make voting by absentee ballot available to those who need it."

Jenkins, the southern Louisville resident who has had mail delivery issues, said he voted by mail in the June primary.

But if given the opportunity to do so by mail again, he said he is less likely to do so this time.

Voting by mail in June "was easy, and it was safe and it was great," he said. "And now I'm less apt to do it just because I can't be assured that my ballot is going to get there on time."

*USA TODAY contributed to this report. Contact Ben Tobin at [bjtobin@gannett.com](mailto:bjtobin@gannett.com) and 502-377-5675 or follow on Twitter [@TobinBen](https://twitter.com/TobinBen). Support strong local journalism by subscribing today: [subscribe.courier-journal.com](https://subscribe.courier-journal.com).*

## **Mail problems?**

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