

Questions for Gary J. Vaccarella
DE-PA-2 District Manager, U.S. Postal Service

Questions from Chairman Gerald E. Connolly
Subcommittee on Government Operations

September 7, 2022, Hearing: “Delivering for Pennsylvania: Examining Postal Service Delivery and Operations from the Cradle of Liberty”

1. Congresswoman Dean’s office has received inquiries from constituents stating they have heard from postal staff that multiple post office locations will be closing. Constituents have named the post offices in Bridgeport, Gladwyne, Royersford, Spring City, and Phoenixville as locations slated for closure. The Postal Service, however, has been unclear whether those offices are under consideration for possible closure. Please provide a description of the process and methodology you used to determine which facilities were considered for closure and which ones the Postal Service Plans to close. In addition, please provide us a detailed list of Post Office closures from the past year and those intended in the foreseeable future.

Response:

We appreciate the opportunity to clear up this misinformation. We currently have no plans to close Post Office retail locations in Pennsylvania. As the Postal Service implements the Delivering for America plan, the latest improvements focus on creating Sortation and Delivery Centers (S&DCs), which are centralized carrier delivery unit operations. These centers will be phased in starting in fall 2022, and the process will evolve over time as more opportunities present themselves. This process will take time and will be driven by operational and financial modeling to better serve our customers. These S&DCs are expected to streamline transportation, improve efficiency, and provide a better working environment for our employees.

Some of these S&DCs will be new buildings, while others will be existing structures. This will allow us to be more efficient and allow the Postal Service to better serve customers, particularly by expanding a mailer’s reach from a single drop location.

These changes will be behind-the-scenes, and the typical postal customer will be unaware they are happening. For our employees, we will be consolidating the sites where postal carriers begin and end their routes to more centralized locations. Any movement of employees will be done in accordance with the respective collective bargaining agreements. The creation of S&DCs will not change the locations of the Postal Service’s Post Offices and other retail units, including PO Box service.

2. Congresswoman Dean’s office received outreach from local tax collectors regarding an uptick in theft and fraud related to inbound local taxes. This increase in crime has led to

costs both for constituents in her district and the tax collectors. Though appropriate officials are working on solutions for taxpayers who anticipated receiving discounts for filing their taxes early, they have, nevertheless received penalties for not paying taxes because their filings were stolen in the mail. What actions is the Postal Service taking to ensure that tax payments and other mailed financial transactions arrive safely?

Response:

The U.S. Postal Inspection Service works to prevent mail theft and to investigate instances of mail theft when they occur. Postal Inspectors across the country regularly partner with Internal Revenue Service (IRS) criminal investigators and Treasury Inspector General for Tax Administration (TIGTA) agents to investigate tax fraud and associated identity theft. These efforts are especially important during tax season, as tax payments, refund checks, and sensitive personal information are commonly transferred via the mail. While the U.S. Postal Service successfully delivers millions of tax payments and refunds every year, thieves may target tax mailings in order steal and “wash” checks. Check washing describes a process by which criminals obtain checks unlawfully and wash them in chemicals to remove the ink and change information such as the payee’s name and/or the dollar amounts. After this process, the offenders subsequently deposit the fraudulent check into a bank account under their control. Unfortunately, in many instances, the victim and/or bank does not discover the checks are counterfeit until weeks or months later. This crime can affect both tax payments sent to tax collectors and refund checks sent to taxpayers.

In Fiscal Year (FY) 2021, the Postal Inspection Service arrested 1,079 individuals for mail theft and 537 for mail fraud of all kinds. The Postal Inspection Service continues to employ a national strategy to address mail theft. This national strategy includes and is not limited to:

- **Improved physical security of mail collection boxes, including pilot projects testing enhanced security locks.**
- **Close collaboration with local and state law enforcement to step up patrol arrests whenever they observe mail theft and increase intelligence sharing and reporting.**
- **Maintaining a strong partnership with the U.S. Department of Justice on the investigation and prosecution of mail theft and violent crimes affecting postal employees.**
- **Participation in financial crimes task forces consisting of local, county, state, and federal law enforcement officers.**
- **Deploying additional Postal Inspection Service personnel, known as “jump teams,” to areas with high volumes of letter carrier robberies and mail theft.**
- **Utilization of the latest technology and techniques to target cyber-enabled financial crimes, including those associated with mail theft.**

- **Utilization of the Postal Inspection Service’s rewards program, which provides monetary rewards for information leading to the arrest and conviction of offenders.**

While the Postal Inspection Service is working diligently to arrest those who steal mail, including tax payments and other financial instruments, we advise the public to take the following steps to reduce their susceptibility to mail theft:

- **Use the letter slots inside the Post Office, or hand it to a letter carrier. If customers choose to use collection boxes on the street, we recommend they only deposit a letter before the posted collection time, so it does not sit in the collection box overnight.**
- **Pick up mail promptly after delivery. Do not leave it in a mailbox overnight.**
- **Ask a trusted friend or neighbor to pick up your mail if you are expecting checks, credit cards, or other negotiable items.**
- **Contact the issuing agency immediately if you do not receive a check or other valuable mail you are expecting.**
- **Immediately notify your Post Office and anyone with whom you do business via the mail if you change your address.**
- **Do not send cash in the mail.**
- **Tell your Post Office when out of town, so they can hold your mail until you return.**
- **Report all suspected mail theft to a Postal Inspector by submitting an online complaint at www.uspis.gov/report or calling 877-876-2455.**
- **Consider starting a neighborhood watch program. By exchanging work and vacation schedules with trusted friends and neighbors, you can watch each other’s mailboxes (as well as homes).**
- **Consult with your local Postmaster for the most up-to-date regulations on mailboxes, including the availability of locked centralized or curbside mailboxes.**
- **Sign-up for Informed Delivery at USPS.com. This service provides daily email notifications of incoming mail and packages.**

Additionally, the Postal Inspection Service has created numerous Public Service Announcements (PSAs) to educate the public about various frauds and scams. Our most recent tax scam PSA can be found here:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jVR7przz6sQ>. We appreciate anything your offices can do to assist us getting the message out regarding tax fraud.

3. **Given the surge in recent hiring efforts, please detail Postal Service efforts to ensure that new postal workers in Philadelphia are properly qualified and trained to handle the increased instances of check theft and fraud. How is the current hiring and screening process for new Postal Service employees sufficient to address ongoing concerns regarding conduct and performance quality of Postal Service workers in the region?**

Response:

The U.S. Postal Inspection Service conducts background investigations on new employment candidates for positions within the U.S. Postal Service. If, as a part of that investigation concerning information is discovered, the candidate may be considered unfavorable for employment within the Postal Service. Additionally, the Postal Inspection Service regularly communicates with Postal Service employees through Stand-Up Talks, Public Service Announcements, and other means on recognizing signs of mail theft, mail tampering and other crimes involving the security of the U.S. Mail.

The U.S. Postal Service Office of Inspector General (USPS OIG) has jurisdiction related to crimes committed by employees, and the Postal Inspection Service partners with the USPS OIG as appropriate. Such investigations can include mail theft, workplace violence, drugs in the mail, fraud, and other offenses.

4. Please provide the data Congressman Evans and Chairman Connolly requested detailing how many postal thefts in the Philadelphia region have been reported and investigated as well as how many have ended with an individual or individuals charged for the crime and convicted of the crime in the Philadelphia region.

Response:

The Postal Inspection Service reviews every mail theft complaint that it receives. Mail theft complaints in Philadelphia and surrounding jurisdictions¹ reported to the financial crimes database rose by 266 complaints from FY 2020 to FY 2022. This upward trend is consistent with the general increase in all types of crime the nation is facing right now. The number of complaints in FY 2020 were 1,805, 1,967 in FY 2021, and 2,071 in FY 2022. The Postal Inspection Service wants it to be as easy as possible to submit a complaint, but that results in the Postal Inspection Service receiving many nonactionable complaints or complaints that are about general delivery issues unrelated to a criminal offense. Many instances of reported mail theft are investigated under “area cases,” in which an initial investigation is conducted to determine whether a complaint is likely to be mail theft and will meet prosecutorial thresholds. If it is so determined, cases are opened, or “jacketed,” when an area case investigation indicates an arrow key theft, a volume attack, contract employee theft, or mail theft that involves gang activity, merchants, or recidivists. In FY 2020, Postal Inspectors jacketed 15 mail theft cases and made 18 arrests, and received five convictions. In FY 2021, Postal Inspectors jacketed five mail theft cases, made eight arrests, and received two convictions. In FY 2022, Postal Inspectors jacketed 11 mail theft cases, made 11 arrests, and received six convictions. Arrests and convictions reported in this period may be related to cases initiated in prior reporting periods and not all arrests during this period have been

¹ Jurisdictions include Philadelphia, Abington, Villanova, Blue Bell, Bala Cynwyd, Wayne, Lansdowne, Jenkintown, King of Prussia, Havertown, Upper Darby, Marcus Hook, Hatboro, and Drexel Hill.

adjudicated. Additionally, many cases jacketed in FY 2022 are still under investigation.

It is also important to note that complaints, investigations, and arrests are not one-to-one. One investigation and arrest may resolve dozens if not hundreds of mail theft complaints. For example, on October 4, 2022, the United States Attorney for the Eastern District of Pennsylvania announced the indictment of three individuals related to the robbery of a Postal Service employee, the theft of a postal key and subsequent theft of mail.² When Postal Inspectors and law enforcement partners executed search warrants in the case, they recovered 372 stolen checks and 11 stolen money orders, potentially resolving hundreds of cases of reported mail theft.

5. Please identify any noteworthy patterns or other insights gleaned from examining the postal theft data requested above.

Response:

Postal Inspectors are working to bring offenders to justice for stealing mail and for acts of violence and intimidation against USPS employees. Last year, Postal Inspectors made 1,511 arrests nationwide for mail theft alone. Through August 29, 2022, nationwide mail theft arrests total 1,142. Unfortunately, we are witnessing a recent increase in robberies of letter carriers for keys to steal mail, predominantly in major metropolitan areas like Philadelphia. This increase is likely attributable to a variety of factors, and this upward trend is consistent with the general increase in all types of crime across the nation. Additionally, the increase in parcels delivered by both USPS and private companies has created more opportunities for thefts. While it is important to remember that violence against USPS employees is still very rare given the scale of USPS operations, one violent or threatening encounter is too many.

The increase in theft includes a shift in how mail thieves operate. While many instances of mail theft have traditionally been relatively unsophisticated and perpetrated by lone actors, recent trends demonstrate more organized criminal groups are seeking to steal identities and financial instruments from the mail. The growth of the dark web and encrypted messaging services have allowed criminals to traffic in financial instruments and personally identifiable information that can be taken from the mail in a much more organized and sophisticated manner. The Postal Inspection Service has dedicated resources to investigating illegal conduct on these platforms that has a connection to the mail, postal crimes, the security of postal facilities and personnel, or to the Postal Service generally, and will continue to monitor and protect against new threats as they change and evolve.

² [Three men arrested for Pennsylvania carrier robbery, mail theft](#), *Haverford Patch*, *KYW Radio*, *WTFX-TV*, *WHTM*, *Phila. Inquirer*.

6. During the hearing, Mr. Rendina mentioned that the U.S. Postal Inspection Service has made efforts to prevent mail theft. Can you describe these efforts in greater detail? What evidence demonstrates that these efforts are successfully reducing mail theft?

Response:

The Postal Inspection Service employs a multi-layered approach to combat mail theft and robberies. Postal Inspectors also work with Federal, state, and local law enforcement as a force multiplier in our efforts to ensure America's confidence in the U.S. Mail and for a safe and secure workplace for Postal Service employees. When it is suspected mail theft is being committed by a Postal Service employee, the Postal Inspection Service works closely with the U.S. Postal Service Office of Inspector General (USPS OIG) to identify and bring the guilty parties to justice. By utilizing the diverse roles of its employees and by working closely with its partners, the Postal Inspection Service can fulfil its mission to protect the mail and keep employees safe.

The Inspection Service works with USPS Engineering on security improvements for blue collection boxes nationwide. Many boxes that look relatively unchanged have received significant security enhancements inside of the boxes. Criminals have been known to "fish" for mail out of the collection boxes using a line with a sticky substance. To defeat these attempts, many collection boxes have been retrofitted with a rake device that cuts the line as the criminal attempts to pull the line and mail back through it. Other criminals have used various tools to pry open the boxes – in these instances the Postal Service has reinforced the inside of the box to make it difficult to open the box with brute force. In some instances, traditional collection boxes have been replaced with a higher security model that uses a skinny slot for customers to slide their letter into the collection box.

We have also worked on the locking mechanisms for the boxes. In addition to key and lock enhancements, we are working on electronic coupling with the physical key/lock. We are currently piloting this program at select locations.

Stopping crime before it happens continues to be a priority. Postal Service employees are instructed to report collection boxes, apartment panels, and neighborhood cluster boxes that may be in disrepair or show signs of tampering. Postal Inspectors also educate their law enforcement partners about mail theft, how to recognize signs of mail theft, how to properly report it, and how we can partner with them to investigate the matter. The Inspection Service also has robust communication and education campaigns with the public. Its website at USPIS.GOV and its social media channels give tips on how to protect your mail. Inspectors also conduct in-person presentations at HOA meetings, Senior Centers, and businesses. They also provide various tips on how people can protect themselves, their mail, and their personal information.

7. During the hearing, Mr. Rendina said that the U.S. Postal Inspection Service plans to “use technology” to make arrow keys less valuable. Please describe the technology referenced at the hearing while ensuring you protect any essential law enforcement information. Has this technology been tested at any postal facilities? If so, is there any evidence that this technology is effective? If it has demonstrated effectiveness, when does the Postal Service plan to scale this technology to other locations?

Response:

The Inspection Service works with USPS Engineering on security improvements for blue collection boxes nationwide. Many boxes that look relatively unchanged have received significant security enhancements inside of the boxes. Criminals have been known to “fish” for mail out of the collection boxes using a line with a sticky substance. To defeat these attempts, many collection boxes have been retrofitted with a rake device that cuts the line as the criminal attempts to pull the line and mail back through it. Other criminals have used various tools to pry open the boxes – in these instances the Postal Service has reinforced the inside of the box to make it difficult to open the box with brute force. In some instances, traditional collection boxes have been replaced with a higher security model that uses a skinny slot for customers to slide their letter into the collection box.

We have also worked on the locking mechanisms for the boxes. In addition to key and lock enhancements, we are working on electronic coupling with the physical key/lock. We are currently piloting this program at select locations. For security reasons, we cannot discuss the specific technology currently being piloted. However, the Postal Inspection Service would be glad to brief you or staff to discuss this effort privately.

8. The Postal Service has not implemented an election mail related recommendation from the Postal Service Office of Inspector General:

“Leverage established partnerships with state and local election officials to work toward creating a separate, simplified mail product exclusively for Election Mail that would support uniform mail processing, including mandatory mail piece tracking and proper mail piece design. Until this new product is developed, continue to prioritize the processing of Election Mail consistent with past practices.”

Is the Postal Service planning to comply with this recommendation? If so, what is the timeline for that compliance?

Response:

The Postal Service is committed to fulfilling our role in the electoral process when public policy makers choose to utilize the mail as a part of their election system, including continuing to prioritize the processing of Election Mail consistent with past practices.

The Postal Service continues to explore avenues to create a specific product solution for official Election Mail ballots. The business and customer implications in developing this potential new product are complex and fluid. We continue to evaluate how our existing Election Mail services are meeting the needs of the election community, and we will continue to monitor commercial, policy, and legal considerations in determining the appropriateness and timing of pursuing this product. As that process continues, the Postal Service has ongoing dialogue with election officials to improve awareness of mailing requirements for Election Mail and to communicate best practices. This includes the publication of Kit 600 and the 2022 Official Election Mail Guide, which includes guidance on proper mailpiece design, use of mail visibility tools such as the Official Election Mail logo, Intelligent Mail barcode, and other resources that help election officials use the Postal Service to support their Election Mail needs. All these tools and other resources are available to election officials online at usps.com/electionmail.

9. With the number of constituents using mail in ballots on the rise, the Postal Service may need to take additional measures to ensure all mail-in ballots are processed and delivered on time. Considering the current two-day standard for mail delivery in the Philadelphia region, would the Postal Service consider again operating its processing and distribution facilities on the Sunday before elections, as you noted you did for the 2020 election in post-election analysis?

Response:

Consistent with our efforts in the 2020 General Election, we will implement and deploy a variety of extraordinary measures to deliver the nation's ballots in November – practices that extend beyond our normal operating procedures to accelerate the delivery of ballots. Between Oct. 24 and Nov. 29, local postal management is authorized to use extraordinary measures to accelerate the delivery of ballots, when the Postal Service is able to identify the mailpiece as a ballot. Extraordinary measures include, but are not limited to, collection and processing on the Sunday before the election, extra deliveries and collections, arranging special pick-ups, expanded processing facility hours, sort plans at processing facilities to expedite delivery to BOEs, and local turnaround to bypass all processing when necessary. These measures will help to ensure ballots mailed on or shortly before Election Day by election officials and voters are delivered on time, wherever possible.

10. In both your testimony and in follow-up correspondence, you indicated that the Postal Service was in:

Close collaboration with local and state law enforcement to step up patrol arrests whenever they observe mail theft and increase intelligence sharing and reporting.

Why are you not indicating that you are in close collaboration with the Postal Service's own Postal Police Officer force? Is there a plan to rely on state and local police forces instead of Postal Police Officers? If so, how would that shift law enforcement costs and responsibilities between the Postal Service and state and local communities?

Response:

The Postal Inspection Service is made up of three categories of employees: (1) U.S. Postal Inspectors; (2) Professional, Technical and Administrative (PTA) employees; and (3) Postal Police Officers (PPOs). U.S. Postal Inspectors are federal agents charged with investigating any crimes with a Postal Service nexus across the country, including mail theft and robberies. PTA employees provide investigative and administrative support for Postal Inspectors and their work in investigations and security. PPOs are the uniformed branch stationed in twenty cities and were first created in 1970 to deter internal and external crime on Postal Service property, typically facilities with large numbers of employees, contractors, and customers and that offer various services or contain large amounts of mail. The PPOs play a vital role in protecting the people, mail, and facilities on those properties.

Every day, U.S. Postal Inspectors across the country partner with federal, state, and local law enforcement to enforce over 200 laws pertaining to the U.S. Mail. While the Postal Inspection Service maintains a robust force of Postal Inspectors, the number of state and local law enforcement greatly outnumber the amount of law enforcement officers in any one federal agency. State and local law enforcement are also knowledgeable about their community and often possess expertise that can greatly aid all types of criminal investigations. For those reasons, the Postal Inspection Service actively partners with state and local law enforcement whenever possible. Those partnerships include joint investigations, financial crimes task forces, roll call presentations, and community outreach and education. These partnerships are a force multiplier and do not involve a shift in cost or responsibility.

Postal Police Officers (PPOs) do not investigate mail theft. Rather, they provide a vital security function on site at USPS facilities determined to be at higher risk for assaults, robberies, and break-ins. It is important to note that if the jurisdiction of the PPOs was legislatively modified, the Postal Inspection Service would likely not deploy them in a different manner than they are used today. PPOs are assigned to certain facilities because the Postal Inspection Service has determined that these facilities require the presence of uniformed, trained, and armed officers. At those facilities, PPOs enforce order and act as a deterrent to criminals or employees who may wish to harm the people inside or compromise the U.S. Mail. Removing those officers from Postal Service property, where concentration of mail and employees

exist, would put not only postal facilities at risk, but also the employees and customers who use those facilities every day

Allowing PPOs to patrol the streets would not decrease mail theft. Because of the enormity of our operations - 163.1 million delivery points on approximately 233,000 letter carrier routes and 140,000 blue collection boxes - the potential is vanishingly small for one of the 581 PPOs to happen upon the theft of mail or a robbery in progress while on patrol. The off chance of a patrolling PPO witnessing a postal crime actively in progress should be contrasted with the very real increase in risk to postal infrastructure, personnel, and customers that would occur at unguarded, high-risk facilities.