

Letter carriers challenge do-not-mail initiatives



Photo by Stephen Lea

Berkeley, California, offers a case study for activists who might have to combat a do-not-mail initiative in their town.

To pro-consumer legislators, so-called “do-not-mail” lists seem like the next logical step after anti-telemarketing do-not-call registries—with a further benefit of ecological friendliness. While their intent might be virtuous, do-not-mail lists have some serious consequences, including the potential to eliminate more than half of an already downsized mail-stream. This would choke off badly needed revenue and put USPS finances in further jeopardy at a time when recovery is anything but assured.

These well-meaning lawmakers might not have considered all the implications of do-not-mail registries, and this is where the NALC can lend a hand. By getting involved in the do-not-mail debate at the local level, letter carriers can explain the difference between mail, which can easily be set aside by patrons and dealt with at their own convenience, and telemarketers, whose persistent phone calls can create a nuisance any time of day or night.

Carriers can also demonstrate that much of today’s mail actually comes from recycled material which, with a proper program in place, can be recycled again.

“A do-not-mail registry is rife with too many risks and too few benefits,” NALC President Fred Rolando said. And his message has begun to take hold: In recent years, legislators who have introduced do-not-mail bills in Maryland, Colorado and Montana have all withdrawn them after they were contacted by NALC members, as well as large-volume mailers, direct marketers, and other members of the mailing community.

Head on

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When city councils in Seattle and San Francisco brought do-not-mail resolutions up for deliberation, Region 1

National Business Agent Manny Peralta and California State Association President John Beaumont decided that they needed to be diligent and reach out to USPS management at the area level to discuss strategies for any similar initiatives that might pop up in the future.

They didn’t have to wait long: In late 2009, a do-not-mail registry initiative was introduced in Berkeley, the famously progressive community across the bay from San Francisco. Peralta, Beaumont and local NALC branch presidents approached Bay Valley District managers, who agreed to provide education through stand-up talks and “news breaks” on all aspects of the Berkeley initiative, particularly on job-related issues.

“The NALC took a more aggressive approach,” said Region 1 Regional Administrative Assistant Brian Voigt, “by using educational material to recruit letter carriers to become a voice of opposition and education wherever the initiatives are introduced and proposed.”

These educational materials showed carriers how do-not-mail initiatives only look good on the surface—that if such initiatives were approved, they could wind up bringing about a loss of \$6 billion in annual national revenue. Also, ads that would be restricted by such registries would be a mere drop in the bucket in terms of preventing waste—only 2.4 percent of the 246 million tons of paper waste created annually—and surveys have shown that many people have a strong preference for receiving important information via the mail rather than by electronic means.

Facts into action

Once educated, California carriers talked with business community leaders and wrote to Berkeley city council members about the do-not-mail issue. At a subsequent council meeting, a proponent of the initiative, who had met with carriers, managed to delay a vote on it and got the proposal deferred to a committee for further study and consideration.

Meanwhile, NALC members and others testified before a local labor commission, which ended up voting not to support Berkeley's do-not-mail registry. After the labor commission's report was submitted to the council, a business community representative and California State Chair Beaumont met with the entire city council. The pressure worked, and the council withdrew its do-not-mail initiative.

When it looked like a similar do-not-mail proposal would be on the agenda in nearby Oakland, the California activists once again prepared for the next battle. However, having seen the results of the debate in Berkeley, Oakland's city

council decided to pull its own initiative before it even came up for a vote.

A similar story played out to the north in Spokane, Washington. When a do-not-mail initiative came up for a vote in front of the Spokane city council in early May, Evergreen State letter carriers testified against the motion, then watched as it went down to defeat by a 6-to-1 vote.

"It's so amazing what can happen when the NALC and USPS work together for the same common goal," RAA Voigt said, cautioning that do-not-mail is far from dead. "We can take time to celebrate our successes, but we also need to be diligent and ready to act again." ✉

Vote by mail legislation introduced in Senate

Vote-by-mail took a large step forward in May when Oregon senators Ron Wyden and Jeff Merkley introduced a package of bills designed to give every American the opportunity to vote in elections through the U.S. mail. Though still a far cry from the Oregon system, where all elections are conducted by mail, the law would guarantee the availability of absentee ballots.

Currently, more than two dozen states and territories impose some restriction, usually demanding information about someone's health, travel or religious activities as the basis for allowing an absentee ballot request.

"We need more participation in our democracy, not less," said Sen. John Kerry of Massachusetts, a co-sponsor of the Senate measure, S. 3299. "This bill breaks down needless barriers, making it easier for all Americans to exercise their fundamental right to a voice and a vote."

NALC President Fred Rolando, in a letter to the Senate promoting the package, pointed out that "28 states currently allow universal absentee voting, and no state which has implemented this practice has reversed course."

NALC has worked with USPS to help promote vote-by-mail, reminding elected officials that the Postal Service has been cited as the most trustworthy government agency year after year. USPS has also posted information for officials

about mail-in voting at usps.com/electionmail/welcome.htm.

In addition to guaranteeing the right to an absentee ballot, the Senate bills would provide grants to states and smaller jurisdictions that want to institute vote-by-mail, like the Oregon system.

Oregon, considered the "gold standard" of the vote-by-mail movement, has seen tremendous voter participation results.

"The Oregon experience has shown that vote-by-mail has been a clear winner with consistently high voter participation [and] costs that are 30 percent less than elections using traditional polling places," Sen. Wyden said.

In the House of Representatives, H.R. 1604—a companion bill to the Senate legislation—sponsored by California Rep. Susan Davis, has already passed out of committee and is awaiting action on the House floor.

"The reality today is that ever-increasing numbers of voters choose to vote by mail because people pursuing the American dream are getting up earlier, commuting longer distances in more traffic and they savor precious family time," said Davis.

The Senate bills will next face committee review before further action is expected. You can follow both bills on the Library of Congress's website at thomas.loc.gov. ✉

