

Letter from the Editor

The postmaster general had just delivered the latest in his slash-and-burn campaign—this one aimed at closing some 300 postal processing centers across the country. The phone calls were coming in fast and furious to the NALC Communications and Media Relations Department that day in mid-September, from newspaper and TV reporters in state after state, from national media outlets and from trade publications.

Reporters, rushing to crank out the story, wanted our comment. We won't be commenting, we said, for two reasons. Our members don't work in those plants and, more importantly, we aren't interested in weighing in on the latest proposed cuts: today, processing centers; yesterday, 120,000 workers; the day before, 3,700 post offices; the day before that, Saturday delivery (in fact, we of course would, and did at the time, comment forcefully on that latter absurd idea).

But before reporters hung up, we told each of them this: If, however, you're interested in a story that goes beyond the obvious, if you want to help your readers or viewers understand why these drastic service cuts are being proposed, if you want to inform them about the real financial situation at the Postal Service and about a better option than reducing services to the American people, then we'd be glad to work with you. And, by the way, you'll have a lot better story than a back-and-forth about a particular plant.

Some reporters demurred, the space or time allotted them allowing only for the announcement and a brief reaction.

But others were intrigued, including some from key media outlets such as *The Des Moines Register*, whose influence in its state (Iowa) is matched by few news organizations around the country.

In short order, President Rolando got back to the newspaper's reporter. The impact was evident the next day.

The story began rather predictably: Four mail processing centers in Iowa are among 252 being studied for closure across the United States, federal officials said Thursday. It quickly turned anything but.

Technology such as email and Internet bill paying has contributed to a massive decline in postal usage. Since its peak about five years ago, total annual mail volume has decreased by 43.1 billion pieces to around 171 billion last year.

But another big piece of the fiscal picture—with a \$5.5 billion price tag—stems

from a 2006 congressional mandate that requires the Postal Service to prefund retiree health benefits, which no other federal agency is required to do.

The National Association of Letter Carriers has argued that prefunding is illogical and unfairly saps the Postal Service of operating money.

"When you prefund future retiree benefits for 75 years, you're prefunding payments for people who don't work for us yet and for people who aren't even born yet," said Fred Rolando, president of the Letter Carriers.

Additionally, the Postal Service has been overcharged as much as \$75 billion in pension obligations that should have been paid for by the U.S. Treasury, the union and federal postal officials have argued.

This was news to the reporter when he spoke with us. A few hours later, it was part of the news for hundreds of thousands of Iowans and, given the Internet, to folks well beyond the state's borders. How quickly a little context can expand a reporter's grasp of an issue and thus his framing of the story.

Sticking with Iowa, a similar call from a local CBS affiliate led us to reach out to Region 5 RAA Mark Sims. His subsequent interview focused the TV report heavily on the pre-funding issue and the need for congressional action.

The dual blanketing of just this one state is a window into the level of activity, and the results, being achieved as letter carriers inform the public and its elected representatives about the financial situation at the Postal Service and the value of the universal network.

President Rolando has made the case effectively on "PBS NewsHour"—the nation's most respected evening newscast, with 3 million viewers—and in newspapers as well as on radio and TV stations throughout the country. Meanwhile, rank-and-file members, branch officers, state presidents and NBAs have been nothing short of remarkable: writing letters to the editor and op-ed pieces or pointing out where we should do so, as well as calling our attention to unfair magazine covers or misinformed radio talk show discussions.

The fight will only grow more intense, and we must broaden the participation at all levels of our union. Whether talking to people, calling radio shows or writing to newspapers, no letter carrier can be on the sidelines. Consider it one more way we serve the public. This is about saving America's Postal Service. ✉



PHILIP DINE

EDITORIAL STAFF:

Managing Editor Philip Dine
Designer/Web Editor Mike Shea
Internet Communications Coordinator
Joe Conway
Writer/Editor Rick Hodges
Editorial Assistant Jenessa Kildall

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