



October 2001

After the horrific events on Sept. 11, 2001, came the anthrax attacks. The first set of anthrax-laced letters bore a Trenton, NJ, postmark dated Sept. 18, 2001. It wasn't until early October 2001 that the effects of those letters would have an impact on how mail would be handled. Let me take you back in time to a period of uncertainty.

At that time in my career, I was the national business agent for Region 12 in Philadelphia. I was on my way to a meeting with the USPS at the Main Post Office in Philadelphia. I had just gotten on I-95 South when RAA Shelly Williams called. He told me that he had just spoken with Trenton Branch 380 President Tony Di Stephano. Tony had concerns about a potential problem with some mail that had gone through the mail stream. I told Shelly that I didn't like the feeling I was having about what he had just reported. I told him to cancel the meeting in Philly, call Trenton and tell them I was on my way there and I would be attending their labor-management meeting.

Upon my arrival, everything seemed normal. About 15 minutes into the meeting, we started to discuss the mail issue. In the middle of the discussion, local and state police, postal inspectors, FBI and military personnel entered the building and informed everyone that we were to evacuate the building immediately. We were then advised that they believed the building might have been contaminated with anthrax.

Many things occurred during the days, weeks and months ahead. Congressional leaders visited the location. Hearings were held. The news media broadcasted live from the location. RAAs Bill Lucini and Shelly Williams and administrative assistant Fran Hojlo all came to assist during these times. Al Ferranto was the director of safety and health at NALC Headquarters, and we were in constant contact with him. We set up a satellite regional office at the local NALC branch building. Other offices were also affected—Jackson, NJ; Princeton, NJ; Bellmawr, NJ, and Brentwood in the DC area. Problems were reported by the membership in many locations throughout the country during these times.

The carriers never wavered. Circus-like tents were erected and casing equipment was brought in from other offices in the area. The carriers set up shop in parking lots and started to sort the mail the very next day. Delivery was never compromised! In the evening, there were briefings provided by the USPS. Doctor Ed from the New Jersey Department of Health addressed our questions and concerns and was a great help to all the postal employees. Hamilton Township Mayor Gilmore was instrumental in securing the medication needed to protect everyone. All of the postal employees went to the Robin Wood Johnson Hospital to receive their antibiotics. President Emeritus Vincent R. Sombrotto came to the location to speak to everyone, which was truly inspiring. Letter carriers, clerks, mail handlers and all of management attended.

After several months of working in the tents, the Postal Service was able to secure a new building across the street from the contaminated Hamilton Processing Center. Carriers are working in that facility today. It took several years to actually clean up all the facilities. The decontamination of the Brentwood facility took 26 months at a cost of \$130 million. The Hamilton facility remained closed until March 2005 and its cleanup cost \$65 million. Some facilities were equipped with sensing devices to detect anthrax and to radiate the mail before delivery.

Reports indicate that five people died from anthrax exposure and 17 others were infected.

The days, weeks and months that followed were interesting, to say the least. Through it all, I can tell you that the brave and dedicated letter carriers were heroes in my book. They proved to America that, in our troubled world, letter carriers deliver for America.

So when you hear our slogan, "Neither snow, nor rain, nor heat, nor gloom of night, stays these couriers from the swift completion of their appointed rounds," remember to be very proud of what you do. America counts on you! Thank you to all the letter carriers throughout the country for the job you do and your steadfast devotion. ☒