

# REMEMBERING SEPTEMBER 2001 THE ANTHRAX ATTACK

## AND LETTER CARRIERS' ROLE IN KEEPING US PREPARED AGAINST A FUTURE ATTACK

**A**s the nation looks back 10 years to the events that changed history beginning on Sept. 11, 2001, letter carriers also recall how terrorism touched our workplace. The distribution of deadly anthrax spores using the U.S. mail set off a wave of fear in post offices across the country, which was quickly followed by fierce determination on the part of letter carriers not to let fear stop us from doing our jobs. Carriers immediately took a leadership role in protecting not only our own craft, but postal workers and the public as well.

In the years that followed, the threat to the public of biological terrorism led the USPS and the Department of Homeland Security to form a partnership that makes letter carriers part of the solution. Together, we established plans to use our universal delivery network to distribute vital medical supplies such as antibiotics if a biological threat arises, providing Americans with a way to get help quickly without leaving their homes.

In the week following Sept. 11, 2001, the country was still in mourning—both for those who died in the attacks and for the nation's sense of security—when the anthrax attacks first took their toll. Five people died from anthrax infection after exposure to letters containing spores, including two postal clerks at

the Brentwood postal facility in Washington, DC. Some letters containing anthrax also were found in, or were suspected of having passed through, postal facilities in New York, New Jersey and Florida. Others were addressed to two U.S. senators and to several media outlets.

As the Postal Service and government authorities scrambled to set up procedures to screen the mail for further bioterror attacks, Brentwood and other postal facilities were shut down until they could be scrubbed of anthrax contamination, a process that ended up taking years to complete. Letter carriers at these facilities labored under the strain of working in tents and temporary buildings, while carriers across the nation confronted the fear that the mail in our cases and satchels could now threaten our lives or the lives of our families and customers.

Nevertheless, we did our jobs.

"We cannot allow the Postal Service to be intimidated," then-President Vincent Sombrotto told a Senate panel in October 2001. His determination reflected the courage that letter carriers brought to the job in the days after the attacks—before any comprehensive process for screening the mail for bioterror agents was in place—as biological terrorism was added to the famous list of hazards to our informal creed. The Postal Service soon ran a television ad declaring on behalf of postal workers: "Neither snow, nor rain, nor heat, nor



Allan Harris (l), president of Louisville, KY Branch 14, attends a meeting on the rollout of the Cities Readiness Initiative.



gloom of night, nor the winds of change, nor a nation challenged, will stay us from the swift completion of our appointed rounds. Ever.”

In Trenton, NJ, where most of the anthrax letters had been postmarked, letter carriers worked under tents while they waited for their building to be decontaminated. “I am very proud of the courage and dedication of the letter carriers,” Tony DiStephano, then-president of Trenton Branch 380, told the Senate panel. “We’re not going to alter our lifestyles because of terrorists.”

Thousands of postal workers were given antibiotics as a precaution while they looked anxiously for signs that they might have become infected. A few tested positive for exposure, but survived. Trenton Branch 380 member Terry Heller was the only letter carrier known to have contracted anthrax. Unlike the two Washington postal workers who died after inhaling anthrax spores, Heller’s infection was found to have come from skin contact, which is less deadly. After a long recovery, Heller went back to her job.

“Protecting the safety of the public and those working for the U.S. postal system on what has become an unexpected front line of defense against terrorism is an urgent priority,” Sen. Joseph Lieberman (D-CT) told Sombrotto. “The bottom line here is the Postal Service is at the heart of this nation’s critical infrastructure and is one of the foundations of our quality of life.”

The commitment to a safe workplace for postal workers required some pressure from NALC, however. For instance, federal officials immediately tested

Senate workers for anthrax and provided powerful antibiotics as a precaution. But until they were pressed to do so by the union, they failed to test postal employees in New York who might have had contact with anthrax-laced letters.

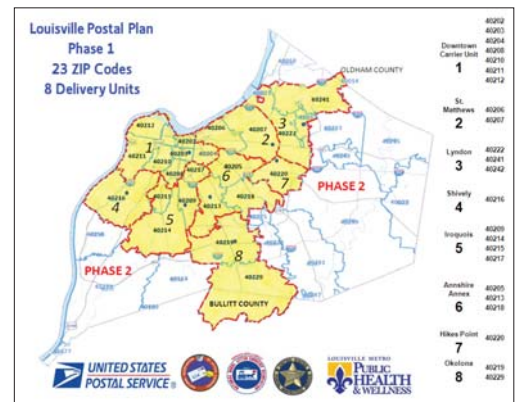
In the months and years that followed, NALC worked closely with USPS management to set up systems to detect anthrax and other biological threats before they pose a threat to workers. Al Ferranto, who was then the NALC’s director of safety and health, worked tirelessly to assure that such threats could be detected early. The Postal Service installed sophisticated equipment to screen mail for biological threats. Some facilities changed mail-handling procedures and equipment to help prevent exposure to or dispersion of biological agents.

“The letter carriers responded very well to the issues. They didn’t panic,” Ferranto recalled. “We had carriers working in parking lots and tents.” They continued working outside in the cold weather until Ferranto insisted they get warmer quarters. “This is not Valley Forge,” he told managers.

The Postal Service did have an anthrax protocol in place before the attacks, Ferranto said, but obviously it was inadequate. And the problem got worse because “some of the medical advice we got wasn’t good advice.”

## CITIES READINESS INITIATIVE

Today, the Postal Service and postal employees who were victimized by bioterrorism are becoming part of the solution in the event of future attacks. Realizing that the Postal Service’s unique



**Top: President Fredric Rolando (c) and Director of Safety and Health Manuel Peralta Jr. (second from l) meet with representatives from the Postal Service about the Cities Readiness Initiative.**

**Above: A look at how the roll-out of the program is being organized in Louisville.**

universal delivery network offers a perfect way to reach Americans rapidly in the event of a biological attack, the Department of Homeland Security and Department of Health and Human Services have tapped carriers, on a voluntary basis, to deliver antibiotics and other supplies to affected homes, creating the Cities Readiness Initiative (CRI).

Post offices in several cities have been testing CRI (see *Director of Safety and Health*, page 30). The testing worked out the logistics of getting the supplies to the post office, giving letter carriers access to preventive antibiotics immediately (while assuring each carrier involved is medically able to take them without suffering an adverse reaction), providing protective clothing and equipment to protect letter carriers from biological threats, and delivering the antibiotics and other countermeasures to homes in time, all while coordinating these tasks with the other agencies involved, such as police departments.

"The Cities Readiness Initiative is a perfect example of how the Postal Service's

universal network of letter carriers can serve the public like nobody can," NALC Director of Safety and Health Manuel Peralta said. "We can bring antibiotics to people faster than any other method, and we can do it without anyone needing to leave their homes, which could help prevent further infection and keep distribution orderly—no panic, no crowds, and much less strain on local emergency authorities and hospitals."

After a pilot program was launched in Minneapolis-St. Paul, CRI is deploying in Louisville, KY, this month, nearly 10 years to the day after the anthrax attacks, and will expand to other regions soon.

"With the Cities Readiness Initiative, letter carriers are volunteering to do an important and possibly hazardous mission for the public," President Fredric Rolando said. "Of course, that's part of what we do every day. It's gratifying that we've turned from being victims of terrorism 10 years ago to being part of the fight against terrorist attacks and epidemics." ☒

## Two anti-union state senators removed in first wave of recalls



NALC national officers, staff and family members manned a phone bank for the Wisconsin recall election at AFL-CIO national headquarters in Washington, DC, on Aug. 8.

# TWO WINS IN WISCONSIN

**U**nion supporters claimed their first two victories in Wisconsin last month when recall elections for six state senators resulted in the ouster of two Republicans who had backed Gov. Scott Walker's union-attacking budget bill. Though it wasn't enough to flip the leadership of the State Senate over to Democrats, it was the first salvo in a battle that is only heating up.

On Aug. 9, Democrat Jennifer Schilling was declared the winner over Republican state Sen. Dan Kapanke in the 32nd District, while in the 18th District, Jessica King defeated state Sen. Randy Hopper. After the election and unions' and activists' victory in all three pro-labor Democratic state senator recall elections a week later, Republicans hold a very slim 17-16 majority in the State Senate.

Under Wisconsin state law, elected officials cannot face recall until they've been in office for more than one year, which is why activists targeted the six Republicans. Gov. Walker and other state senators who were voted in on the Republican wave last year cannot be recalled until next year.

"Let no one be confused," President Fredric Rolando said. "This is the first step in our fight against those who seek to destroy collective bargaining. We will never let up against those who attack workers' rights."

The recall campaigns turned ugly very quickly, with out-of-state billionaires and special corporate interests flooding the Republicans' campaigns with money to pay for attack ads. And though the contests were fought in more conservative areas of the state, several of the races ended up being very competitive.

One interesting note to remember is that these state senators were all elected during the same Wisconsin election that went overwhelmingly for Obama and other Democrats in 2008. That suggests the districts lean heavily Republican, so the recalls occurred despite an electorate that normally does not vote Democratic.

"We sent a message that workers' rights must be respected," Rolando said. "And every elected official in Wisconsin knows that if they attempt to take away union members' rights, we're going to go after their jobs."

The two victories set the stage for a recall of Gov. Walker and other anti-union state senators next year, a fight that will take place on much more favorable political ground—a statewide election. Polls continue to show that Wisconsin voters would not elect Walker if the election were held again. ☒