

# Step B update



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**I**t has been awhile since I wrote about this subject, so I decided to use my space this month to report on Step B of the Dispute Resolution Process (DRP). The DRP replaced the old grievance procedure throughout the country more than 15 years ago, and even longer for those of you who were in the original test locations.

The original intent was for each Step B Dispute Resolution Team (DRT) to issue Step B decisions using the *Joint Contract Administration Manual (JCAM)* within 14 days of receiving grievances from Formal Step A of the DRP. The idea was that a Step B decision would give the local parties direction on resolving future

disputes involving the same situation. Then the local parties would resolve a higher percentage of their own grievances and reduce the number of Step B teams needed to issue timely decisions.

In 2003, the parties signed a document called the “USPS-NALC Joint Statement of Expectations” (M-01492). This document set forth a commitment for promoting a set of honorable principles for grievance handlers from both parties designed to promote and encourage settlement of disputes at the lowest possible step of the DRP.

Over the next several years that followed, we had national joint meetings where we brought all the Step B teams in for a few days each year to continue promoting the principles set forth in the document referenced above. The area/regional counterparts also made sure that annual joint training sessions were conducted at the local level in most places around the country to further reinforce these principles and ensure that any new players received joint DRP training. Over time, we have gotten away from what I call the basic maintenance of the DRP as referenced above.

It has been true for many years that 75 percent of grievances that are appealed to Step B are resolved and 60 to 70 percent of the grievances impassed by the Step B teams are resolved before they reach an arbitrator. It follows that these facts should translate to more grievances resolved at the local level.

**So where are we with that? We still have 58 full-time Step B teams that serve the 67 USPS districts around the country. This number hasn’t changed in close to a decade.**

There are currently 2,098 cases pending a decision at Step B. Of those, 768 grievances have been at Step B awaiting a decision for more than 14 days. Last year at this

time, we had 1,551 cases pending a decision at Step B with 526 grievances that had been at Step B awaiting a decision for more than 14 days.

There are 1,282 of 2,098 cases currently pending a decision at Step B and 563 of 768 grievances that have been at Step B awaiting a decision for more than 14 days that come from 16 of the 67 USPS districts. We have 15 additional back-up Step B teams activated to assist with clearing the backlogs that we have at present.

About half of the 16 USPS districts in question simply received an abnormal amount of cases on one or two occasions and the Step B DRTs that issue decisions for these districts will clear their current backlogs and return to normal.

The other half of these USPS districts has a long-term problem with backlogs. The common thread in these places is that the DRTs are productive teams, but they typically receive more cases from Formal Step A than can be handled in a timely fashion. The end result is that grievances from these areas often get sent to other DRTs for a Step B decision, which causes more delays and, in some cases, inconsistent decisions. This in turn causes more cases to be appealed to Step B from Formal Step A, thereby creating a never-ending cycle of backlogs at Step B.

**We recently made a permanent change to where cases** will be decided that involved four NALC regions and five USPS districts. This change is intended to end one of the cycles of perpetual backlogs that has existed for many years.

The agreement is to form new Step B DRTs to issue decisions for the entire Lakeland and Chicago districts, to maintain the practice of issuing Step B decisions for the Central Illinois and Greater Michigan districts by the same Step B team, and to begin the practice of having Step B decisions issued in the Gateway District by the same Step B team. These changes took place three weeks ago as I write this. The early results are positive. The five Step B teams involved have a combined total of 54 cases pending at Step B with no cases awaiting a decision for more than 14 days from the date of receipt.

It is still too early to say how this change will ultimately work out, but it is a good example of how we can try to end the perpetual Step B backlogs that exist in some places around the country.

**I am hoping that once contract negotiations are concluded, we can find our way back to doing the things that promote and encourage the parties at every step of the DRP to make a real attempt to resolve their grievances themselves instead of passing them to someone else to make a decision.**