

Stopping illegal opioid shipments the right way



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Letter carriers get to know the folks we serve. We're part of the neighborhood. We see the balloons tied to mailboxes to welcome new babies into the world. We watch children grow up and leave home. Since we know our customers, we witness their tragedies and setbacks, too.

I'm sure thousands of letter carriers have personal knowledge of our country's epidemic of opioid drug abuse. Over the past 15 years, more than 180,000 Americans have died from drug overdoses, mainly from opioid pain medication. Millions of others have been hospitalized or have become addicted to legal pain killers or illegal opioids such as heroin and fentanyl. Surprisingly,

there's a postal element to this epidemic.

In recent months, there have been a lot of news stories about illegal shipments of opioids from Mexico and China via the mail. Irritatingly, many of these stories carelessly refer to letter carriers as unknowing "drug dealers." This is grossly unfair, especially when it turns out that this media meme is driven by some of the Postal Service's private-sector competitors and their paid flacks—companies that want to use the opioid crisis to win international business away from USPS. Nevertheless, combating opioid shipments made through the mail is an important issue. NALC and USPS want to help, but helping must be accomplished the right way.

Unfortunately, a bill being pushed by UPS and FedEx, and a group they fund called Americans for Securing All Packages (ASAP), has serious implications for the Postal Service and its finances. The Synthetics Trafficking and Overdose Prevention (STOP) Act of 2017 proposes to apply private-shipper customs rules to the Postal Service, an idea that UPS has been pushing for decades. The STOP Act would impose huge costs and penalties on USPS that, unlike with private shippers, could not be recovered by charging other nations' postal operators or their customers. And because it would take effect immediately, the bill would threaten a disruption of the free flow of letters, flats and packages across international borders.

The STOP Act also would require USPS to supply the Customs and Border Patrol (CBP) with advanced electronic data (AED) on all flats and packages from overseas to facilitate a CBP review of suspicious shipments. It also would impose a \$1-per-package customs fee on USPS packages, a \$400 million annual cost that, under the Universal Postal Union (UPU) treaty, cannot be recovered from other countries' postal operators or their customers. (The UPU is an intergovernmental agency of the United

Nations that regulates international postal policy, rates and services.) In addition, the bill would make the Postal Service civilly liable for compliance and penalties associated with any violations of the customs process, including those committed by foreign operators—which makes no sense.

The Postal Service already is negotiating to improve security with foreign countries' postal services, focusing on China, Mexico and a handful of other countries most associated with illicit opioid shipments. These efforts, along with a new package security program at JFK Airport in New York City, have already increased the percentage of USPS package shipments with AED to nearly 50 percent. More needs to be done, but it does not make sense to apply CBP's private-shipper rules to USPS. The Postal Service's situation is totally different.

We have a universal service obligation in the United States that includes the delivery of parcels from every country in the world. The private shippers can choose their customers and they have total control over the induction of all shipments they accept and the rates they charge. The Postal Service must operate in all countries, as required by the UPU treaty, and must accept all shipments from other countries' postal operators at rates set by the treaty. Those postal operators control the induction of shipments that are handed off to USPS. Many of the operators in poorer countries lack the technological and financial resources to comply with the AED mandate and other customs' requirements. Therefore, imposing the STOP Act immediately might force the Postal Service to block inbound flats and packages from non-compliant countries. Such countries would likely retaliate and close off communication and commerce—to the detriment of Americans living at home and abroad.

NALC urges Congress to fix the flaws in the STOP Act before considering it. At a minimum, it should provide funds to cover any Postal Service costs incurred by the bill's security measures, which would serve to protect the public health of our country. That's what Congress did in 2001 after the letter mail anthrax attacks—it appropriated \$500 million to USPS to implement a detection system to prevent bio-terrorism.

Moreover, the bill should be amended to provide time to implement its requirements. With a reasonable amount of time, the Postal Service could complete the expansion of its JFK Airport mail security program to all of its international service centers and conduct bilateral negotiations with the key countries from which opioids are coming. More time also would allow the State Department to negotiate a new treaty to improve security practices in all of the 195 countries that belong to the UPU.

Letter carriers want to do our part to fight the opioid epidemic, but we need a bill that serves the American people, not the commercial interests of private shippers.