

Joint Statement on Violence turns 25

It's been a quarter century since the NALC, other postal unions and the U.S. Postal Service joined, with one voice, to confront the issue of violence in the workplace.

A cluster of fatal shootings in postal facilities in the late 1980s and early 1990s left several postal employees dead or injured, many more traumatized, and postal unions and man-

then-NALC President Vincent Sombrotto), management organization leaders and the postmaster general, the Joint Statement on Violence and Behavior in the Workplace declared that “grief and sympathy are not enough.

“This is a time for candid appraisal of our flaws and not a time for scapegoating, finger pointing or procrastination,” it read. “It is a time for reaffirming the basic right of all employees to a safe and humane working environment. It is also the time to take action to show that we mean what we say.”

“The Joint Statement was a watershed document in the effort to deal with workplace violence,” NALC President Fredric Rolando said. “It affirmed that everyone has a part to play in maintaining a work environment in which everyone feels safe.

“No level of violence in the workplace is tolerable,” Rolando said.

The Joint Statement on Violence (M-01242), which was posted on bulletin boards in all postal installations, also put the Postal Service and NALC on the record against abusive behavior, saying that treating others with dignity and

respect comes first. It promised to deny rewards to those who violated that principle and to remove repeat offenders from the USPS.

This month, *The Postal Record* takes a look back at how the Joint Statement emerged and why it broke ground by putting labor and management on equal footing as partners in the effort to assure dignity and respect for all employees.

‘What can we do to stop the violence?’

A spate of violent incidents, culminating in the shootings at the postal facility in Royal Oak, MI, on Nov. 14, 1991, set in motion the crafting of the Joint Statement. The Royal Oak shootings came just five weeks after a similar deadly incident at a postal facility in Ridgewood, NJ.

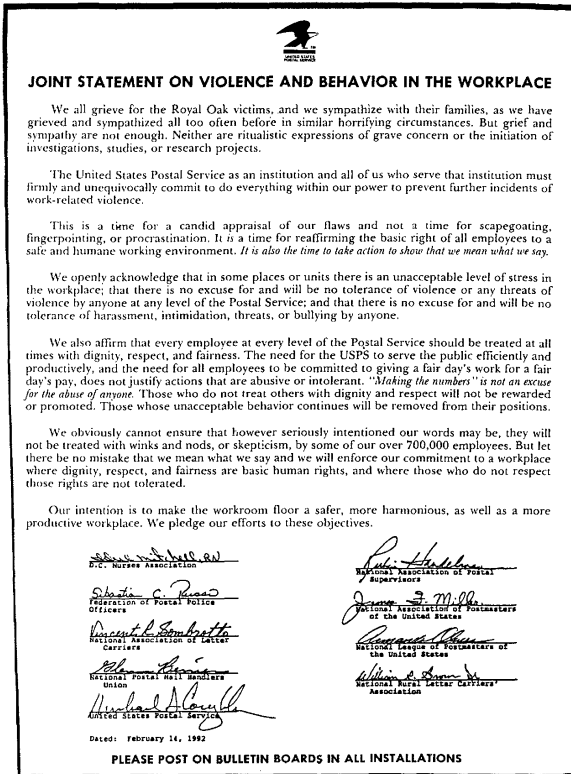
Within weeks following the Royal Oak shooting, President Sombrotto met with a group of representatives of the other postal unions, groups representing supervisors and senior USPS officials. It was an emotional four-hour meeting, but it led to progress—the representatives agreed to work on a joint statement committing them all to be partners with responsibility for preventing violence.

Sombrotto, who died in 2013, wrote about the meeting that led to the Joint Statement in *The Postal Record* shortly after it was signed.

“The need for emotional release was especially obvious at our initial meeting,” Sombrotto wrote delicately.

But the parties got past the anger and focused on their goal, which was “to discuss the most fundamental and essential question these tragedies have raised: ‘What can we do to stop the violence?’” Sombrotto wrote. “The issue was not, ‘Who is to blame?’ This was not a time for posturing or finger-pointing—this was a time for sober reflection and serious exploration of what we could do to end the bloodshed.

“In many ways, the signed statement is a remarkable document,” he wrote. “For one thing, the document publicly commits all of the signatories to the proposition that any actions and behavior that create or contribute to a stressful environment are simply unacceptable.”



agement struggling to find a way to eliminate violence in the workplace.

The first step was to agree that all parties were committed to the process.

That modest but meaningful first step was aimed at changing the Postal Service’s culture by encouraging everyone involved to take responsibility for preventing workplace violence.

Signed on Feb. 14, 1992, by the leaders of the four postal unions (including

Sombrotto's stature in the postal community and his leadership abilities were critical to the success of the Joint Statement. He took his draft of the document that would become the Joint Statement back to the union and management representatives, and with only minor changes, all agreed to sign it.

"The Joint Statement was a very meaningful step in the right direction to ease the tension between management and the workers," NALC President Emeritus William Young said. As NALC vice president at the time, Young was instrumental in winning a 1996 arbitration decision that said the Joint Statement was binding on management, too—meaning that dealing with the problem required managers to take responsibility as well, and that they could face consequences if they failed to do so.

In the decision, arbitrator Carlton Snow declared that the Joint Statement was a binding contractual obligation that NALC and the Postal Service can enforce through the grievance procedure. Snow empowered regional arbitrators to enforce the statement and to issue remedies against postal supervisors who violate it.

Where NALC has presented strong evidence of violent, abusive, harassing or threatening behavior, regional arbitrators have been able to order supervisors to apologize, to get training, or to be removed from a supervisory position altogether.

"Once management knew they were also covered," Young said, "that reined in some of the tactics they had used."

It also meant that the parties not only had a commitment, they had an obligation to uphold the principles in the Joint Statement.

Breaking new ground

"By signing the Joint Statement, postal management and unions acknowledged that there is stress in our workplace that needs to be addressed," NALC Director of Safety and Health Manuel Peralta said.

"Simply blaming each other doesn't solve the problem. We took joint responsibility for preventing future acts of violence."

How to prevent violence and harassment has eluded many workplaces in America, and tragically, many workers and employers in this country feel helpless. But with unions to speak for employees and with an organized system for resolving disputes in place, the Postal Service could take crucial action.

"It's an historic example of how unions and employers can work together to tackle problems," Peralta said. "By working to resolve problems and ease tension through a process that gives workers a voice, the Postal Service and its unions are doing something substantive to prevent violence in the workplace. The grievance procedure needs to be used to address employee dignity and respect concerns.

"NALC was ahead of the curve with the Joint Statement," he added. "This was an unprecedented action. We didn't wait for someone else to tell management to do this; we negotiated it and we made it enforceable."

Subsequent to the establishment of the Joint Statement, the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) recommended that all employers issue statements against workplace violence.

"One of the best protections employers can offer their workers is to establish a zero-tolerance policy toward workplace violence," the OSHA recommendation states. "It is critical to ensure that all workers know the policy and understand that all claims of workplace violence will be investigated and remedied promptly."

"We're proud to have played a small role in the development of OSHA's approach to workplace violence," President Rolando said, adding that "the 25th anniversary of the Joint Statement is a reminder of our ongoing and unending commitment to seek dignity and respect for letter carriers in their places of work." **PR**

Need help?

EAP is always available

The USPS Employee Assistance Program (EAP) is available to any postal employee, and to family members living in the employee's household, to help with life's challenges. It's a free, voluntary and confidential program that offers assessment, counseling, consultation, life coaching and training to postal employees and their families.

"Most carriers never need EAP, but for those who do, it can be a lifesaver," NALC President Fredric Rolando said. "For all of us, it's a bit like insurance—you may never use it, but it's reassuring to know that it is there for you."

Reasons a postal employee might turn to the EAP include difficulty dealing with family, children, marriage, parenting, divorce, care for the elderly, child care, depression and other emotional issues, grief or loss, substance abuse, anxiety, job performance, and personal or work relationship problems.

EAP also helps postal employees support each other or deal with the repercussions of other people's challenges. If you notice a co-worker who may need help, you can contact EAP. The counselors will help you to size up the problem and to decide how to approach that person to offer help, including possibly referring the co-worker or family member to EAP.

EAP is jointly administered by NALC, other postal unions and USPS. All EAP counselors have a minimum of a master's degree in counseling or social work, as well as clinical experience in dealing with a wide range of personal and workplace concerns.

Communications with EAP are confidential—your privacy is protected by strict federal and state confidentiality laws and regulations and by professional ethical standards for counselors.

Letter carriers seeking EAP services may call 800-EAP-4-YOU (800-327-4968), go to eap4you.com, or contact their local union officers for information. **PR**