

## Protecting the mailbox offers a modern civics lesson



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**I**f you were a child in the 1970s, or you raised children during those years, you undoubtedly will remember the Saturday morning “Schoolhouse Rock!” cartoon series, and one of its musical lessons on how Congress enacts legislation. The song was called “I’m Just a Bill.” It amusingly described how successful legislative proposals advance through each house of Congress before being signed into law by the president. That’s basically what gets taught in high school civics classes, without the snappy music. But that is not how Washington really works. It’s a lot more complicated.

What gets left out are the organized interest groups; the think tanks; the regulatory agencies; the impact of lobbyists, grassroots and media strategies; and the role played by special congressional agencies such as the Government Accountability Office (GAO) and the Congressional Budget Office (CBO). A brewing debate about changing or repealing the mailbox statute provides a good example of how this more complicated world of civics works—and why it’s so important for unions such as NALC to be fully engaged.

**I first raised this issue of the mailbox statute in my column in the October 2015 *Postal Record*.** The mailbox statute is the law that gives the Postal Service exclusive access to patrons’ mailboxes. It is crucial to protecting the sanctity of the mail and to enforcing the postal monopoly that makes it possible to provide universal service at the most affordable rates in the industrial world. I wrote about an economic consultant’s study, financed by UPS, which falsely claimed that the mailbox statute unfairly subsidized the Postal Service’s operations to the tune of \$14 billion annually. It has become clear since then that this so-called “Sonecon study” was the just the beginning of a coordinated campaign to damage or destroy the Postal Service as a competitor to UPS. We produced a detailed rebuttal of the study, but it did not go away.

The study was used by a writer at the Brookings Institution, a Washington, DC, think tank, to argue for breaking up the Postal Service and privatizing its competitive services. The Brookings report was riddled with errors and misconceptions, including the phony claim that the mailbox statute is an unfair subsidy worth billions of dollars. I wrote to the

author, a well-known Democratic Party policy analyst, and outlined the report’s fatal flaws in a five-page letter—and to her credit, she agreed to withdraw the report and work on fixing it (though that still has not been done). Sadly, the think tank helped keep the mailbox access issue alive.

Indeed, last October, relying in part on the Sonecon study, the chairmen of the Postal Service’s oversight committees in Congress, Rep. Jason Chaffetz (R-UT) and Sen. Ron Johnson (R-WI), sent a letter to the GAO requesting an analysis of the Postal Service’s monopolies, including the mailbox statute and the letter mail monopoly. It’s likely that UPS urged the chairmen to send the letter, since one of its requests centers on updating a UPS-inspired study by the Federal Trade Commission in 2007 that concluded that the Postal Service’s federal status “likely provides it with a net competitive disadvantage versus private firms.” UPS rejected that conclusion and wants a “do-over.” Getting the FTC to adopt the bogus \$14 billion subsidy finding seems to be the goal.

The GAO, which is Congress’ research and audit agency, is now working on the chairmen’s request—and NALC is actively engaging with the agency on the issues. Not only did we fill out the stakeholder surveys distributed by the GAO, but I have assigned my chief of staff to take part in a panel discussion on the mailbox statute later this month that is being organized by the GAO. At that event, we will defend the importance of retaining the mailbox statute. We will argue that proposals to open the nation’s mailboxes to competitors would be disastrous. Doing so would destroy the ability of letter carriers to easily enforce the letter mail monopoly, facilitate the emergence of cream-skimming competitors who would serve only profitable areas, and effectively deregulate the delivery of letter mail. We also will highlight the danger of such proposals for American citizens, whose mail and privacy are protected by restricting access to their boxes to the Postal Service, an accountable public institution.

**Winning policy debates like the one on the mailbox statute is crucial—especially before Congress starts the process of making laws, as covered by “Schoolhouse Rock!” and your high school civics class.** Workers who don’t have unions lack a voice speaking on their behalf in the actual, more complicated world of legislation and politics.

NALC provides such a voice for letter carriers. And the letter carriers we celebrate in this issue of the magazine for their Letter Carrier Political Fund contributions make that voice much stronger. Please thank them for doing so. Better yet, join them.