

'Stars of the season' must be ready to defend universal service



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During the last several weeks of the fall and the early weeks of winter, letter carriers demonstrated without a doubt that the United States Postal Service is becoming more important and valuable to our country than ever before. Thanks to the hard work of our members, along with our brothers and sisters in the other postal crafts, we stepped up to deliver for the American people and the American economy.

Just think about it: In the weeks leading up to the national election, thousands of candidates and advocacy organizations used the mail to woo voters and to inform millions of citizens about bond proposals, policy referenda and state constitutional amendments (see story, page 10). Then, when it came time to make democratic decisions, tens of millions of Americans voted by mail with ease and security.

We delivered absentee ballots to voters and returned them to election commissioners all across the country. In Western states, our role was particularly important—100 percent of voters in Colorado, Oregon and Washington, and nearly 50 percent of California's 12 million voters, voted by mail. Given that voter turnout was 10 percent to 20 percent higher in pure vote-by-mail states, and given that it costs much less to conduct elections in those states, we're just scratching the surface of how valuable the Postal Service can be to our democracy in the future. If expanded, vote-by-mail could even help end the divisive and destructive efforts to harass voters and suppress the vote in many parts of the country.

From the election, we shifted into the holiday shopping season—delivering between 750 million and 800 million packages for America's e-commerce merchants and gift-shipping households. On the peak delivery day, the Postal Service delivered 30 million packages. That works out to about 100 packages per city letter carrier and rural letter carrier. Noting that the Postal Service delivers more household e-commerce parcels than any other carrier, a Wall Street analyst told a CNBC audience that letter carriers were the "stars of the season." Further, a Nov. 30 investment letter on the logistics industry from the Stiffel Company noted that "the future of USPS probably hasn't been better in a long time."

I believe that to be true. But whether it will remain true is up to us. That's because our future will be determined by Congress. Sensible postal reform remains essential. And while the effort to attack our networks has lost some of its steam in recent years, we can't be complacent about such attacks or any other threat to the Postal Service. Indeed, we have to continue to resist legislative efforts to curtail or weaken the last-mile delivery network that makes the Postal Service an invaluable asset to e-commerce merchants everywhere.

Let me give you an example of a new threat. Last fall, the chairmen of our congressional oversight committees, Rep. Jason Chaffetz (R-UT) and Sen. Ron Johnson (R-WI), sent a letter to the Government Accountability Office (GAO), the research arm of Congress. They requested a preliminary investigation into the cost and the continued need for the letter mail monopoly and the mailbox statute. Together, these provisions make it possible for the Postal Service to serve 152 million households and businesses, at least six days a week, at the most affordable postage rates in the industrial world. The GAO contacted NALC and asked for our views. We also have been invited to participate in a forum on these issues this month. We will do what we always do—staunchly defend the Postal Service.

But we will also need the legislative activism of our members to protect the USPS. GAO requests don't just appear out of thin air. There are often ideological interest groups behind them. Such actors have always targeted the Postal Service, and there are private commercial rivals of USPS that fund them. For the free-market interest groups, the Postal Service's success is a repudiation of their views—it proves that a government agency can be efficient and successfully serve the common good. For the commercial rivals, it's simply a question of profits and share prices.

We've recently seen a concerted effort by a whole range of right-wing organizations, funded by secret corporate donations, to attack the Postal Service and postal reform efforts. These attacks have come from the well-known Heritage Foundation and Americans for Tax Reform as well as murkier, less-well-known outfits such as the Taxpayer Protection Alliance and the Sonecon Company. You may remember them from when United Parcel Service tried to make the bogus case against the mailbox statute. (See the October 2015 issue of *The Postal Record*.)

We're the only folks who can stop these efforts. Armed with the truth, we will have to be "stars of the season" once again. Happy New Year.