

Having fun with OWCP



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OWCP, the acronym for the Office of Workers' Compensation Programs, is commonly used by NALC as a catch-all term referring to the filing and management of on-the-job injury claims. The mere mention of OWCP sends many NALC activists running for the exits. While these same activists can quote the nuances of Article 8 of the national contract and file successful grievances, they often freeze when OWCP issues arise.

Ron Watson, instructor extraordinaire

When I was a new union activist, I was lucky enough to attend an OWCP training by a then-local business agent named Ron Watson. I was amazed at how Ron took a complex set of federal laws and regulations and broke them down into easy-to-understand concepts, with a focus on enforcing postal management's responsibilities under the law. Ron's trainings were always lively as well as informative.

As a regional administrative assistant, Ron took OWCP representation one step further by using the national contract to enforce OWCP regulations incorporated into Postal Service handbooks and manuals. Legions of shop stewards in Ron's region were taught how to research the law and the contract to file grievances for postal management mistakes in handling OWCP claims.

As any of his students will tell you, taking a class from Ron was always an exhilarating experience. Students grew to expect to be challenged to research the laws, regulations and handbooks. Pointed questions pervaded his classes; it was not for the faint of heart. You either embraced Ron's teaching techniques or found them intimidating. A wise instructor challenges their students to excel, and that's just what Ron did.

What I learned from Ron Watson was the simple fact that OWCP rules and regulations were easy to learn and fun to enforce. Whether it is management's errors or OWCP's mistakes, helping injured workers is extremely satisfying work. Even the most seasoned OWCP representative learns something new every day.

In 2004, Ron accepted a job at NALC Headquarters managing the Workers' Compensation Department. The columns Ron wrote for *The Postal Record* read like instruction manuals, with detailed references to federal laws and regulations, always keeping in mind that the burden of proof in every workers' compensation case rests solely on the injured worker.

Ron's appeals before the Employees Compensation Appeals Board (ECAB) resulted in significant changes to

OWCP policy affecting schedule awards and benefits for injured workers with same-sex spouses.

In 2007, Ron retired from NALC. In typical Watson style he spent the next year cataloging decisions from the ECAB while continuing to help injured workers he had represented in the past. During that period, the Postal Service began removing injured workers from their limited-duty jobs via the National Reassessment Process (NRP).

Ron recognized the danger NRP represented to our injured workers and communicated those concerns to NALC Headquarters. When it became clear that injured workers were being harmed nationally by the NRP program, NALC hired Ron to monitor the program and develop arbitration advocates to argue cases involving NRP. As NRP grievances grew, those advocates developed winning arguments and won 86 percent of the NRP-related arbitrations and created a case law of winning decisions that helped many letter carriers.

Ron returns to fight again

In 2013, President Fred Rolando named Ron Watson the director of retired members. In typical fashion, Ron dove headlong into Office of Personnel Management rules and regulations, so he could accurately answer NALC members' retirement questions. One thing Ron quickly recognized was deficiencies in the way the Postal Service was providing annuity estimates to FERS retirees. It was through Ron's work that FERS retirees now get an estimate of the FERS Annuity Supplement in Postal Service annuity estimates.

Ron was instrumental in working with President Rolando in creating eight regional workers' compensation assistants (RWCAs) to provide greater representation for injured letter carriers.

Ron Watson is, once again, retiring from NALC and we will all miss him. While he will no longer be an NALC employee, his legacy can be found throughout NALC wherever an injured worker finds a helping hand from a fellow union member. There are many injured letter carriers whose lives were significantly improved due to Ron Watson's help.

We have a physically demanding job. You may be the best employee that ever carried mail, but in seconds you can suffer an injury that automatically makes you an outcast to management and co-workers. Be sympathetic to your fellow workers who get injured carrying mail. You could be next.

If you want to help injured workers, don't be intimidated by OWCP. Go to the "Injured on the Job" page at nalc.org. You will find links to OWCP laws and regulations, corresponding postal regulations found in the *Employee and Labor Relations Manual* and past Compensation columns from *The Postal Record*. Experienced RWCAs are eager to help those willing to tackle OWCP representation.