CCA: The bridge to a postal career

on-career city letter carriers have existed within the Postal Service since 1970, but city carrier assistants (CCA) are the first noncareer employees with a direct path to career status. Approximately 55,000 CCAs have been converted to career status since the category was established in 2013. Current and former CCAs who have been converted to career status are bringing change to the letter-carrier workforce and to our union.

Prior to 2013, letter carriers hired in non-career positions had no guarantee that they would be hired as career letter carriers. Since 2013, though, all newly hired career carriers have come from the non-career ranks by seniority in each installation. For decades, NALC had advocated for a vehicle to assure that any non-career letter carrier has a way to reach career status.

Together, CCAs and career carriers who began as CCAs now make up 43 percent of the city carrier workforce. The flood of new letter carriers has brought youth back to the workforce -10 years ago, only 5 percent of carriers were under 30, compared to 14 percent today.

From dead-end job to career path

The creation of the CCA position changed the way the Postal Service hires career letter carriers. When the need to hire a career letter carrier arises, the Postal Service can no longer look to hire off the street while it has a non-career carrier working in the installation where the career position exists.

The original non-career carriers were substitute carriers who, before the creation in 1970 of the modern U.S. Postal Service, simply showed up to the post office each day to check in. If there was work for them that day, they received

a daily wage; if not, they went home with no pay. Since they could be fired if they weren't available when needed, substitutes couldn't hold any other job. Their only hope for advancing was to wait for a career civil service position to open, which could take years, and their years of service as substitutes had no bearing on whether they would receive a civil service post.

After 1970, the substitute carrier category was eliminated and a new category, the casual carrier, took its place. Casuals were limited to two consecutive 90-day terms of employment in a calendar year. As with substitutes, casual carriers received no benefits from the Postal Service, had no rights to union representation and could lose their jobs at any time.

Even more important, as with substitute carriers, casual carriers had no direct path to career employment with the Postal Service—the time they spent on the job did not factor into their prospects for career employment as a letter carrier.

In 1992, a new and temporary category of worker, known as a transitional employee (TE), was created by an arbitrator after management claimed the need for temporary employees during the introduction of Delivery Point Sequencing (DPS) mail. USPS considered TEs a "buffer" until automation could make them obsolete, and when DPS was fully implemented in 1998, all the TEs on the rolls were let go.

USPS negotiated with NALC to reintroduce TEs beginning in 2006, as the Postal Service implemented Flats Sequencing System (FSS) equipment. As a result, the casual carrier classification was eliminated. Additionally, TE letter carriers gained some increased rights and benefits beyond those of

casual carriers of the past, including increased pay, the right to join the union, access to the grievance procedure and 360-day terms of employment. However, they still lacked a path to career status and the Postal Service could choose not to rehire them at the end of a term.

In 2012, FSS was fully implemented. NALC and USPS negotiations for a new collective-bargaining agreement reached impasse. The parties then engaged in binding arbitration before the panel chaired by Arbitrator Shyam Das. The January 2013 award replaced non-career TEs with a new category of non-career letter carriers-CCAs. Though NALC wasn't pleased with all the pay and benefit provisions, the arbitrators did accept the union's proposals to create a direct career path for non-career letter carriers.

While the decision was not perfect, NALC had achieved something for CCAs that casuals and TEs never had a bridge to a real future as career letter carriers. And unlike what transpired in 1998, when TEs were arbitrarily let go by the Postal Service, every TE was granted the opportunity to take the Postal Service entrance exam—and thousands were hired as CCAs. CCAs were afforded improved benefits and more job protection with the creation of a form of seniority known as relative standing, which would determine the order in which CCAs were converted to career status. When a career position opens, the CCA with the most days of relative standing is first in line for conversion.

The decision meant that NALC now could welcome thousands of CCAs as brothers and sisters in our union, represent their interests, and offer them the tools they need to learn the job. CCAs

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have been a large part of the union since that time.

Negotiated improvements for CCAs

The Das decision was followed by a new National Agreement negotiated between NALC and USPS that is to remain in force until Sept. 20, 2019. The NALC membership ratified the agreement on Aug. 7, 2017. The new agreement contains several improvements in pay, benefits and advancement procedures for CCAs.

They have a new pay scale that includes step increases. The new agreement also gives CCAs improved USPS contributions toward health care premiums—when they sign up for the USPS Non-Career Health Benefit Plan, they can receive \$125 a month toward the premium for Self Only, or 65 percent of the premium for Self Plus One or Self and Family coverage in their first year of employment, which rises to 75 percent in subsequent years.

The new National Agreement also required USPS to convert to career status all CCAs in large offices who had

> 30 months or more of relative standing prior to the ratification date of the agreement. NALC continues to negotiate with USPS to maximize conversion opportunities in small offices.

The new agreement requires local offices to negotiate annual leave provisions for CCAs in their local memorandum of understanding (LMOU), and eliminates probationary periods for career carriers who spent at least one 360-day term as a CCA.

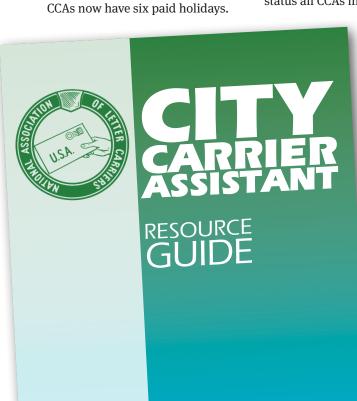
Most CCAs have chosen to join NALC—at 87 percent, the organization rate among

CCAs is nearly as high as the overall NALC rate of 92 percent—and many CCAs have taken leadership positions. To help CCAs navigate their jobs and take their place in our union, NALC aggressively negotiates with USPS on their behalf and represents them on the workroom floor.

The union listens to the concerns of CCAs and provides them with training and advice. As part of that process, NALC held its first national CCA conference in St. Louis in January of 2016, bringing together 174 current and recently converted CCAs from as many branches to discuss CCArelated issues, the history of NALC, the evolution of the non-career workforce, CCA job specifics, the transition to career status and the many ways to get involved in NALC. The participants asked numerous questions and offered a wealth of ideas. Similar events have followed.

CCAs also have participated in NALC's Leadership Academy. Christopher Henwood of Rutland, VT Branch 495 became the first CCA to graduate from the Leadership Academy on June 5, 2015, and several have followed. Henwood, who subsequently advanced to career status, now is a regional workers' compensation assistant (RWCA) working at NALC Headquarters.

When possible, NALC has provided union membership benefits to fit the needs of CCAs. For instance, the Mutual Benefit Association (MBA) offers a CCA Retirement Savings Plan to give CCAs access to retirement savings benefits. It offers both a traditional and a Roth IRAthe balance in the traditional IRA may be rolled over to the federal employee Thrift Savings Plan when the letter carrier converts to career status. There is no open season for enrollment in the CCA



savings plan—one may enroll at any time. Information and applications are available at nalc.org/MBA.

The NALC City Carrier Assistant Resource Guide is a comprehensive reference for both new and experienced CCAs. The guide covers the lettercarrier job and the rights and benefits afforded CCAs, and provides information and guidance for CCAs during the process of conversion to full-time career status. The guide is available from local branches and on the web at nalc. org/CCA-resource-guide. The guide is being revised to reflect the changes in the new National Agreement.

A path to career status

As any CCA or career carrier who converted from CCA status can tell you, starting your letter-carrier career as a CCA isn't easy. Working as a CCA

has become a de facto proving ground for new carriers to test their mettle. No matter what path we each took to begin carrying the mail, many of us look back and remember that in our first days and weeks, the physical and mental challenges were more than we expected.

CCAs work hard as they learn their jobs, which include all the traditional lettercarrier duties as well

as new services being offered, such as Sunday parcel delivery.

As a member of the initial class of TEs who converted to CCAs in 2013, Brad Jasper of Yonkers, NY, worked in one of the first offices in Westchester County, NY, to handle Sunday delivery.

But Jasper, now vice president of Yonkers Branch 387, knew that his hard work as a CCA could lead to a career position, a hope he never had when he signed up for the Postal Service as a TE in 2010.

After working as a freelance film and TV producer, Jasper took the TE job when his own letter carrier mentioned that the local post office was hiring.

"The whole time, they're saying there's no way you'll ever make regular," he recalled. "We don't hire like that—you're just here until we don't need you anymore."

Jasper carried the mail as a TE for three years knowing his place, but when he heard talk of eliminating the TE position in 2013, Jasper and his fellow TEs sensed that it might not be the

end for them.

"We all knew, as TEs, that there's no way the Service was going to survive without some sort of noncareer workforce," he said, "so when they were talking about doing away with the TE position, we knew we weren't going to be just outright released. We knew they couldn't just do away with the necessity for this type of position."

He was right. The

CCA position was created, and Jasper and the other TEs in his office applied for and became CCAs with a path to career status. Before converting, though, they had to endure hard work and uncertainty.

Brad Jasper



"At first it was kind of like the Wild West," he said, as CCAs struggled to find their niche. But unlike during his time as a TE, Jasper knew that his hard work as a CCA was building his relative standing.

He started at No. 13 on the relative standing list and feared that conversion to career status might never occur, but Jasper made career in November of 2014, a few months into his second term as a CCA. It was hard work, but worth the wait, Jasper said.

"I do really appreciate being a regular because of the time I spent as a CCA," he said.

Anthony Carter, a member of Portland, OR Branch 82, is still a CCA, but he has his eye on making career. He applied to the Postal Service for one simple reason, he said: "I want a job that can turn into a career and that I can retire with."

Carter took his job as a CCA in November of 2016, after an unsatisfying stint in food service. "A lot of the things that bothered me about food service were remedied with USPS," he said, "like union representation, more diversity in the workforce, better pay and benefits."

Nevertheless, Carter said, carrying the mail was challenging work. "I came in during the Christmas season. I had to get used to getting up when I used to go to sleep some nights," he said.

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"I've been at it for almost 17 months now," Carter added, "and I've been fortunate to have a couple of long-term opts and hold-downs—which makes life easier—and the job starts to make more sense, and there is a flow that sort of helps you along once you get the hang of things."

Carter has wasted no time becoming involved in his branch—he is an alternate steward.

"I think it is really important to have a resource for CCAs and other carriers when performance is in question, or regarding clarity with contractual obligations," Carter said. "Hopefully, down the road, I'll be that kind of steward, who helps everyone in a station feel at ease because of contract knowledge and understanding of the position."

While he has gained the confidence that he can do the job of CCA, Carter says he looks forward to the steady hours after he converts. "I've gotten used to the CCA life, but it does grind away at you," he said. "Having two days off a week and usually working 40-ish hours a week sounds like a vacation at this point."

Having a bridge to career status makes the initial stress of the CCA job easier to handle because the hard work can lead to better things, Carter said. He urged new CCAs not to give up.

"You're going to have bad days, and several days that make you want to quit. Don't," he said. "It's a lot of new information, a lot of stress, and a totally different job than any I've ever had. But you will get the hang of it."

As he works toward crossing the bridge to career status, Carter has learned a few lessons that he expects will be useful as a career carrier—most importantly, he said, "knowing that

if I'm doing my job the way that's expected, I'm fine."

Mia Nixon still remembers that her first Sunday off was Easter after a stretch during which she worked 88 of 90 days as a new CCA beginning in January of 2015. With two children, then ages 6 and 10, at home, Nixon needed the job, even though she commuted from her home in Baltimore to the Washington, DC suburb of Silver Spring, MD, where she still works today as a career carrier and steward for Silver Spring Branch 2611.

"It's a culture shock," Nixon said. With two school-age children and a 34-mile commute in heavy traffic, she sometimes struggled to keep up with her home life in those early days, which often involved long hours out on her route.

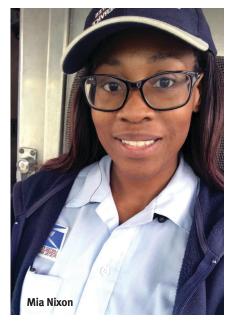
"I'm pushing 7:30 p.m., and I'm trying to figure out who will pick up the kids—it was a struggle," Nixon recalls.

But the pay was better than her last job, she had access to benefits such as health insurance for her family and, best of all, she knew her hard work could lead to career status.

Nixon converted to career status after one 360-day term as a CCA.

"It was such a good feeling" to make regular, she said, "and it was mainly because of the benefits for my children." Converting to career status gave her access to affordable health insurance for her family. As a CCA, family coverage was available, but very expensive, she said. (Following Nixon's term as a CCA, the new National Agreement ratified in 2017 significantly lowered the cost of family coverage for CCAs.)

"I was happy because now I had benefits," she said. "I could take my kids to the doctor and not be afraid



that if they're sick, it's going to cost a lot of money." Nixon also is happy about having a more stable work schedule and retirement benefits.

"The benefits made me happy, and euphoric, about it," she said. Nixon plans to stick with her new career through retirement.

Nixon is an active union member, and she traces her activism to her earliest days as a CCA. After clocking out on a busy day, a supervisor sent her to deliver a package, off the clock and in her personal vehicle, which she damaged in a minor accident. She didn't know it wasn't allowed until a steward told her later.

As a result, Nixon vowed to go to her branch meetings to ensure that she understood the ins and outs of the National Agreement and to avoid another situation like that one. The experience later inspired her to become a steward.

"I've never missed a union meeting since—maybe one," she said. "If you don't go, you don't know." PR