

Reaching out to our injured workers



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Injured workers have few friends. The minute you report an injury, many of your colleagues seem to fall off the map. You can be a great letter carrier, loved and respected by managers and fellow workers, but the minute you suffer and report an injury, you may be abandoned by those who you know so well.

The reasons for this are obvious to most letter carriers. Supervisors abandon you because a recordable injury increases their workload and requires them to fill out forms that are foreign to most of management.

Then, there's your now-vacant route that has to be covered.

And that's when your co-workers may abandon you. Perhaps the ODLers and CCAs will be happy to cover your route, but for some, it's a different story. Instead of having their long weekend off to attend a child's sporting event, they now have to come in and carry your route.

And then there's your family. Suffering a workplace injury means no more overtime. No more Saturday evenings out for dinner and a movie, as you all adapt to the economics of the injured. You're suddenly homebound, interrupting the daily routine of your spouse or family. Adjusting to this new reality can be stressful for all.

Why does our species act this way? Is it genetic—do our genes tell us to abandon the weakest few for the survival of the many?

Or is there a lingering doubt as to the authenticity of your injury, reinforced by the media? There is a well-known term to explain what gets reported in the press—if it bleeds, it leads. Some news outlets seem to revel in reporting on the injured worker found bowling, hiking or (God forbid) taking a vacation. As if people with disabilities should be prevented from attempting to have a good life, despite their now-altered existence.

Many years ago, I had a seriously injured co-worker who went from friend to foe because the NALC could not stop agents of the Postal Service Office of Inspector General (OIG) from following her day and night. Whether we like it or not, the OIG has the right to investigate just about anyone, at any time. I greatly miss my former friend's good-natured laughter and *joie de vivre*. Some things are irreplaceable.

There is a meanness in this world that was absent from the country I grew up in—a country founded on principles of justice and compassion.

In his book *The Unknown Shore*, the late Patrick O'Brien writes about a crew on an 18th-century frigate that's sinking off the coast of South America. The ship's crew members take some solace in the fact that they were swimming toward the shore of a country whose values included

charity and compassion, something they dearly needed.

Injured workers need fellow workers who can offer the same compassion in their moment of greatest need.

How do we letter carriers change the culture of abandonment?

We can start by improving the atmosphere on the work-room floor. Just as no two routes are the same, so it is for your fellow letter carriers.

While the Postal Service may expect every letter carrier to work exactly like another, the reality of humanity is that we are all different. Different in size, shapes and abilities. The Postal Service tends to ignore the reality of our mutual differences and commands uniformity in our workplace performance. What a silly idea.

Compassion begins in our hearts. Learning to revel in our differences and embrace our fellow workers, warts and all, is a conscious step that can revitalize our workplaces. We all should be proud to point a finger, not at each other, but at all of us and the collective effort we make daily to get all of the letters, magazines and parcels delivered, seven days a week.

Your fellow worker who suffers an injury needs your help, too. A letter carrier who is injured and unable to work is faces unique challenges compared to workers in other professions. Letter carriers are part of the community. Shearing the bonds we have with co-workers and customers can be an injury itself.

“We all win when we believe that an injury to one is an injury to all, and respond with compassion and respect.”

We letter carriers are and can be different than this. One of our fellow letter carriers was recently injured in a horrible accident, nearly losing his legs. The accident was recorded on a security camera and went viral over the internet. Letters of compassion to the injured letter carrier poured in from his co-workers and NALC branches across the country. What a wonderful response. I applaud all of those who reached out to this letter carrier.

That carrier is not alone. Letter carriers filed 26,296 injury claims in Fiscal Year 2019 (Oct. 1, 2018, to Sept. 31, 2019). All of those injured letter carriers deserve our compassion and support.

Reaching out to your injured co-workers individually, as an office or as a branch, is a positive step we can and should take. We all win when we all believe that an injury to one is an injury to all, and when we respond with compassion and respect. It is what makes our union great.