




**SHUT
DOWN**

**“Imagine if the
Postal Service
were part of
this mess”**



After 35 days, the partial shutdown of the federal government that began in late December ended on Jan. 25. It was the longest in history.

President Donald Trump and congressional leaders announced a deal on Jan. 25 to end the shutdown for at least three weeks while they continue to negotiate over the immigration issues dividing them.

As the shutdown dragged on, many of the 800,000 affected federal employees from nine major federal agencies struggled to put food on the table and pay their bills without paychecks. Some were furloughed, while others were required to work without pay. Some government services stopped in their tracks. For functions deemed essential that continued during the crisis, such as airport security screening, the shutdown threatened to reduce service levels and worries over threats to safety and security intensified.

The shutdown crisis was triggered Dec. 22, 2018, when President Trump refused to approve bills to extend lapsed funding for the nine agencies unless Congress approved \$5.7 billion toward construction of a security wall along parts of the U.S.-Mexico border.

Letter carriers watched the drama unfold as we delivered the mail as usual. While we were dismayed by the suffering of other federal workers, including many members of our sister unions, we also were relieved that, because the Postal Service is an independent agency, it wasn't included in the shutdown. Our customers were happy that mail delivery continued uninterrupted.

Some letter carriers even found themselves having to explain to confused patrons why they were on the job

in the midst of a government shutdown. Questions like these from postal customers present a great opportunity to explain how the Postal Service works and why it allows letter carriers to provide great service.

Of course, USPS has been an independent agency since 1971, when Congress transformed it in the wake of the Great Postal Strike of 1970 (see page 11). The agency, while still part of the federal government, has not received taxpayer funds since then. By law, it operates on revenue earned from customers. The Postal Service's independent status allowed it to continue to deliver the mail and provide other services even as the government shutdown crippled some federal agencies.

Independence also gives the Postal Service room to compete as a business while fulfilling its mandate for universal service—delivering to the entire nation.

"The Postal Service still needs certain reforms to make it even better," NALC President Fredric Rolando said, "but the basic model from 1971—giving the agency financial independence, the flexibility to serve the public and a voice to its employees through collective bargaining—allows us to keep the mail moving."

Congress had already funded most federal agencies for the current

fiscal year, so those agencies were not affected. Other agencies, such as Social Security and Medicare, don't require annual appropriations. And a few, such as the Postal Service, operate on their own revenue instead of taxpayer funds.

Nevertheless, letter carriers still are federal employees in the civil service, and their retirement benefits are managed by the Office of Personnel Management (OPM)—which was affected by the shutdown.

NALC officers and staff participated in a major protest against the shutdown on Jan. 23 at the Hart Senate Office Building in Washington, DC.





NALC Director of Retirees Daniel Toth said that some retired letter carriers had called to ask if the shutdown would delay their annuity checks or cause other disruptions. Toth said that, to his knowledge, retirees had no issues with OPM related to the shutdown. During the crisis, OPM's website stated that there would be no interruptions in annuity payments.

"We didn't see any problems," Toth said, "but we always keep an eye on things at OPM, whether or not there is a shutdown, and if we see an issue we work to fix it."

No going back

The shutdown crisis and the stress it brought to federal employees, government services and the economy shined a light on the recent White House postal task force proposals for radical changes to the Postal Service.

The Trump administration's task force, chaired by Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin, released its report evaluating USPS finances and operations, "United States Postal Service: A Sustainable Path Forward," in December.

It contained many ideas that would harm mail service and postal employees. NALC President Fredric Rolando called the report "a huge missed opportunity filled with legislative recommendations that are likely to be dead on arrival in Congress."

For starters, the task force launches an all-out attack on the collective-bargaining rights of postal employees by calling for the revocation of the right to negotiate wages by the postal

unions and for postal employees to instead be returned to the federal wage system. Were that change to be made, USPS and postal employees could find themselves affected by a future federal government shutdown. The report puts blame for the Postal Service's financial difficulties largely at the feet of its employees, instead of fully addressing the artificial financial crisis caused by the retiree health care pre-funding mandate passed by Congress in 2006.

The report also calls for allowing USPS to sharply cut the frequency and quality of delivery services, which would result in huge job losses for city letter carriers, and it advocates forcing the Postal Service to dramatically raise prices for the delivery of packages—a highly profitable, and the fastest growing, segment of the Postal Service's volume. An industry coalition representing package shippers warned that the recommendations would "limit access and raise prices" on package delivery, harming consumers and the Postal Service alike.

But when the government shutdown caused a crisis for federal employees and the people they serve, attention turned to the possibility that radical reform ideas like those in the report could erode the Postal Service's independent status. If the Postal Service went back to depending on congressional appropriations, it would subject the agency to the same dysfunction of the funding process that caused the shutdown of other agencies.

"Can you imagine if the Postal Service were part of this mess?" President Rolando asked. "Can you imagine if letter carriers had to sit at home while the mail piled up, or were required to

work without pay? The nation's only universal delivery network would be disrupted. Millions of bills and business transactions would be delayed and millions of checks would go undelivered. The Postal Service delivers more packages than anyone else, and a postal shutdown would devastate e-commerce."

If Postal Service independence and collective-bargaining rights for postal employees both evaporated, it would put the agency and letter carriers back to the days before the Great Postal Strike of 1970, when Congress had sole authority over our pay and benefits through the regular federal funding process—and our only recourse was "collective begging." It would put our jobs, pay and benefits at the mercy of political whims in the House, Senate and White House and expose us to the same broken process that disrupted life for 800,000 of our fellow federal employees during the recent shutdown.

Fortunately, Congress is unlikely to look favorably on changing the Postal Service's independent funding status, especially after the midterm elections brought a host of new pro-letter carrier lawmakers to Congress (for more on what the election results meant for letter carriers, see the February issue of *The Postal Record*). But with bad ideas like those in the task force report still circulating and the dysfunction of the budget process in full view, our job as letter carriers is to push for better solutions.

"We all need to advocate for bringing the Postal Service into the future with common-sense reforms, starting with fixing the pre-funding mandate," Rolando said, "because there's no going back to the old days." **PR**