

Backbone



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This COVID-19 pandemic causes me to reflect on all sorts of things. When I think about our union, I can compare us to a human being. I guess the idea comes from that old line: *You are the U in Union*. NALC has a strong body of members that can accomplish anything. We are a strong body.

This strong body is supported by our union's structure, which includes all of the letter carriers who work for the union. These folks include all of the officers, staff members, those letter carriers who work in the national business agent offices around the country, branch presidents, etc. This group serves as the nervous system and the brain.

Shop stewards are the backbone of our union. No human can function properly without a backbone. Nor can this union. They are also the eyes and ears for all those mentioned above. They are warriors on the front line who are really doing triple duty during these times.

Stewards are the ones who do their best to convince management to abide by the contract. That might sound fairly simple, but it is not. Anyone who has been around for a while knows better.

When it comes to a discipline situation, the process starts with your shop steward going into the office with you and your supervisor for a pre-discipline interview/investigative interview/fact finding meeting (or whatever you call it in your town). They do their best to help you through this kind of meeting. There is an art to this part of the job. Part of the problem is that management usually has no interest in the truth. They normally have already made up their mind to issue discipline before these meetings begin. Therefore, they spend their time trying to somehow trap the letter carrier involved into saying something that builds management's case instead of just objectively getting the letter carrier's side of the story for consideration.

Shop stewards do their best to defend letter carriers when they are issued improper discipline. This is the case most of the time. I would say that 80 percent of the time, discipline is issued because a supervisor does not like a letter carrier, they are mad at one of us, or they were told to issue discipline to one of us for one reason or the other.

Shop stewards do much more than just file grievances for you. They are the bridge between you and management. In many offices, so many more problems and disagreements/misunderstandings are resolved outside of the grievance

procedure. You know what I am talking about here.

Additionally, shop stewards are routinely confided in by letter carriers with personal problems outside of their work experience. The job of a letter carrier is a career position. That means that many of those who get through the CCA part of the job will be here for the next 30 years or more. A lot of personal stuff happens in that kind of time frame. Life is full of personal problems. The Postal Service has the Employee Assistant Program (EAP) available for you anytime, but sometimes letter carriers trust their shop steward to help them instead.

If you are a steward who is on the overtime desired list right now, you are probably working six days a week. You carry your own route and a chunk of another each day. You are doing your best to make sure everyone in your office has access to personal protective equipment and you are reporting it up the line when it is not provided. You are doing your best to enforce the social-distancing memorandum of understanding (M-01915). It is hard to convince foolish managers to stop moving CCAs from station to station, but you are getting it done.

Shop stewards do not do the job for the money. Most of them get paid either nothing or around \$2 to \$4 per day. They also do not do it for gratitude. "Thank you" are two words that shop stewards seldom hear. By the way, when is the last time that you walked up to your shop steward and thanked them for their efforts?

So why would anyone decide to take this underpaid and thankless job? Some letter carriers take the job because they want to help the brothers and sisters at their station. Some take the job because nobody else is willing to do it. Either way, there is a certain satisfaction that comes from successfully representing letter carriers in the grievance procedure that you cannot touch or spend, but is nonetheless a great reward.

Letter carriers expect a lot from our shop stewards. We expect them to be there for us whenever we need them for something. It does not matter if it is after hours or on a non-scheduled day. We also expect perfection from them and sometimes forget that they are merely mortals and there are no magic wands.

The toughest job a shop steward has to do is to tell someone that they do not have a valid grievance or they are wrong about a perceived contract violation. Those words are hard to say, but even harder to accept.

In closing, please remember to say "thank you" to your shop steward once in a while.