

Dealing with the media



**Philip
Dine**

Doing this effectively is more important—though more complicated—than ever for us. We'll get to the practical side of that, but first the broad picture.

For years, the media placed its attention elsewhere than on the Postal Service. Yet NALC, thanks to the hard work of so many of you, from rank-and-file letter carriers to President Rolando and our other officers, managed to change the national conversation about postal issues through thousands of letters to the editor and op-eds or interviews with print, radio and television outlets. You informed the public and legislators—getting the facts out, providing context and debunking the misleading conventional wisdom.

Then came the pandemic. Almost overnight, media interest in all things

postal skyrocketed.

While at times overwhelming, the attention was helpful. Journalists focused on the essential nature of the work of letter carriers as they bravely delivered not just the regular mail, but also the household supplies, medications, stimulus checks and other items that allowed tens of millions of grateful Americans to shelter safely at home.

And, though many reporters suddenly covering USPS were unfamiliar with the topic, that too proved beneficial, because they arrived without preconceived notions and were eager to learn.

Soon, though, we entered a new phase focused on USPS's role in the looming election, and the media rapidly politicized things. A combination of events—the appointment of a new postmaster general, operational changes, comments from the White House, congressional infighting over relief packages, vote-by-mail issues—prompted many news outlets to shift from examining the broad postal role in the pandemic to viewing USPS through a narrow and intensely political prism.

It also brought a different group of reporters, often from the political beat. Given the unfortunate trends roiling the media industry, many arrived with agendas. Liberal outlets saw an opportunity to demonstrate that the administration and the new PMG were intentionally rendering the USPS incapable of meeting the election challenges. Conservative outlets saw a chance to assert that because of incompetence or worse, the Postal Service couldn't carry out its enhanced election role.

Against this backdrop, we've consolidated the way we interact with the media. Before we even consider journalists' requests that we take part in a story, I engage them in an off-the-record conversation aimed at getting them to drop their assumptions, set aside their political narratives, and listen to the facts. If they're not interested, then we're not interested. Fortunately, most are.

All of this has two practical implications pertaining to the excellent work so many of you—more than ever—are doing in this critical period.

One involves how you interact with the media. It's especially vital now—and will likely remain so in the immediate post-election period—that we avoid politicizing matters, engaging in the back-and-forth, or criticizing this person/that group. We need to deliver a constructive message, ignore the political bait and refrain from getting into the weeds on operational issues.

Our message on the election, for example: USPS can handle the vote-by-mail duties—it has more than enough capacity, we're used to meeting peak mail demands including during the holidays, and as letter carriers we take our mission seriously and meet the challenges. We'll get the mail out because that's what we do.

Recent examples of your skillfully communicating this message abound.

In North Carolina, Charlotte Branch 545 President Sylvin Stevens led off a positive public radio news segment by convincingly reassuring folks of the Postal Service's ability to handle mail ballots.

In Tennessee, Region 8 National Business Agent Steve Lassan calmly parried an initial unexpected question from a reporter with Memphis's ABC affiliate and proceeded to get across our can-do approach *vis-à-vis* election mail.

In Connecticut, Hartford Branch 86 President Michael Willadsen dismantled a hostile commentary piece, his letter to the editor of the *Manchester Journal Inquirer* rebutting one point after another using facts and logic.

The second point actually is the initial step in this, and was teased above: While retaining NALC's grassroots, whole-of-union approach, we're emphasizing coordination as we manage the avalanche of media requests—which now go through the Department of Communications and Media Relations at Headquarters. That's to keep our message consistent, avoid political or other pitfalls, and prioritize our resources and personnel while ignoring some inquiries because of the topic, the reporter's attitude or, occasionally, the outlet involved.

So, if you receive a media inquiry, please forward it to us or give the reporter our contact information. If easier, just send the request to your branch president or NBA office, who will get it to us. After vetting the reporter, I'll get back to you to discuss how to best respond.

EDITORIAL STAFF:
Director of Communications and Media Relations Philip Dine
Designer/Web Editor Mike Shea
Writer/Editor Rick Hodges
Writer/Editor Jenessa Wagner
Editorial Assistant Clare Foley

The Postal Record (ISSN 0032-5376) is published monthly by the National Association of Letter Carriers. Periodicals postage paid at Washington, DC, and at additional mailing offices.

POSTMASTER: Send address changes to Membership Department, NALC, 100 Indiana Ave. NW, Washington, DC 20001-2144.

Subscription included in membership dues. First-class subscription available for \$20 per year (contact Membership Department).

© 2020 by the National Association of Letter Carriers.

Circulation: 287,000. Union-printed using soy-based inks.

CHANGE OF ADDRESS? Contact the Membership Department.

Follow us on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and YouTube by going to NALC.org.

