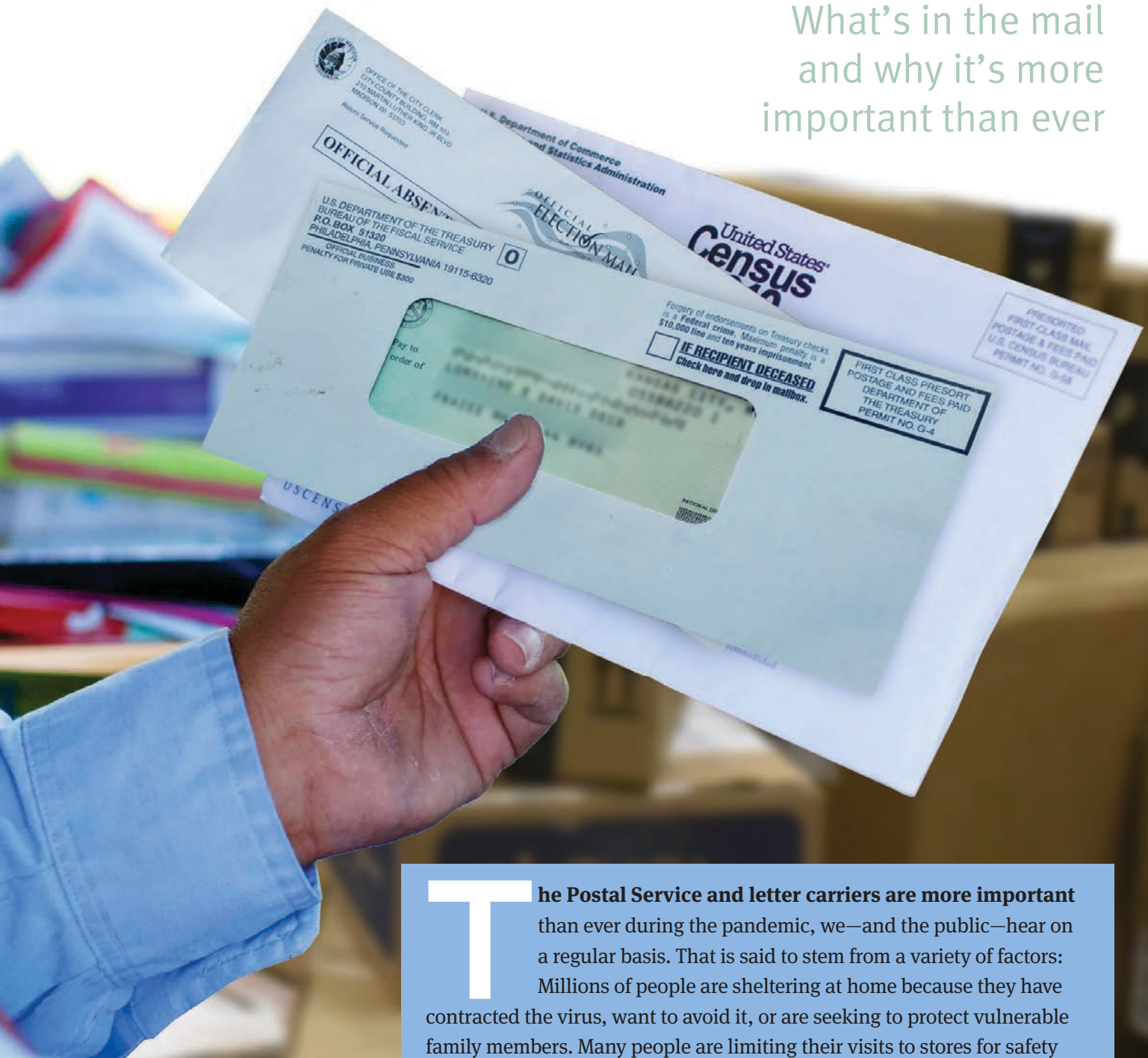


THE MAIL MIX

What's in the mail and why it's more important than ever



The Postal Service and letter carriers are more important than ever during the pandemic, we—and the public—hear on a regular basis. That is said to stem from a variety of factors: Millions of people are sheltering at home because they have contracted the virus, want to avoid it, or are seeking to protect vulnerable family members. Many people are limiting their visits to stores for safety reasons. Still others, hit hard by the economic shutdown, anxiously await government stimulus checks or other financial help. Meanwhile, most Americans need the important information on closings and openings, on elections, or the vital safety guidance that is being sent to them.

The common element in these factors is the mail itself. In all time periods, letter carriers are a welcome sight on their routes, for a host of reasons: They're trusted members of the community, they often help people in an emergency, they may be delivering a birthday card or a letter from a distant relative. But in these evolving and uncharted times, letter carriers—and the mail they deliver—have taken on a new meaning for hundreds of millions of Americans across the country.

Indeed, much of the “essential” nature—an official term designating the carrier craft during the pandemic—of what letter carriers do arises from the shifting composition of the mail during this health and economic crisis.

In this story, we drill down into the mail itself—why it is even more vital in this crisis, how the mail mix has shifted in just a few short months, and how its meaning has therefore changed for Americans, whether in large metropolitan areas or the smallest of towns.

There are many ways to characterize the mail mix, to conceptualize how the content and the meaning of the mail are changing in these unusual times. One approach is to divide the mail into the following three categories:

- A portion of the mail consists of items that have always been and remain important, perhaps even more so in these times—personal correspondence; regular government checks such as unemployment insurance; medications; or bills and other financial communications.
- There are new items that few envisioned at the start of the year but that have arisen because of the

coronavirus or the related economic shutdown—safety guidelines, stimulus checks, and the mass delivery of vital supplies such as food and household items.

- A key share of the mail involves materials that are neither part of typical everyday mail nor related to the pandemic but instead are a coincidence of the calendar. Every household has received U.S. Census forms and, often, follow-up correspondence, for an event that occurs every 10 years. Similarly, we are, or will be, getting election-related mail, such as candidate flyers, polling place information or ballots. These would not be in the mail mix had the pandemic occurred in 2019 or 2021—the last time a pandemic could have been accompanied by both a presidential election and a U.S. Census was 2000; the next time will be 2040.

Obviously these three categories of mail overlap; medications, for example, have been increasingly mailed to residents as the population ages and e-commerce grows; this trend is quickening because of shelter-at-home practices. Meanwhile, it is not merely the fact that election mail and the pandemic are joined in time—the former is more important because of the latter, with many Americans considering voting by mail for safety reasons, while local election officials alert residents about pandemic-related changes in election procedures or polling place practices.

They are, nonetheless, a useful way to understand the big picture.

Now let's look at what's in the mail, how it's evolving, and why it's more important than ever.

THE ENDURING IMPORTANCE OF MAIL

During the pandemic, letter carriers have been deemed “essential workers,” but this is only a reminder that postal employees and the mail they deliver have always been essential. Millions of people rely on the mail for personal correspondence, prescription medications and government benefit payments, and many trust the Postal Service more than the internet for receiving bills and sending payments.

In the case of this kind of mail, the pandemic has reminded the nation how much the mail, and the connection it provides to the outside world, matter.

As any seasoned letter carrier knows from experience, package delivery has soared in recent years, with more Americans shopping on their home computers and smartphones. The rapid growth in e-commerce has boosted package delivery by about 10 percent per year in the last decade.

Receiving prescriptions by mail, for example, has become increasingly popular over time, especially for recurring medications that require regular refills. As prescription delivery grew in popularity, brick-and-mortar pharmacies struggled to compete, but now many have joined the party by setting up their own delivery services.

In fact, receiving prescriptions by mail is about more than convenience—it can improve health outcomes by bringing fewer interruptions in the supply of medications. For example, a study in the *Journal of General Internal Medicine* found that 85 percent of patients using medication to control their cholesterol who used mail-order pharmacies achieved target cholesterol levels, compared to 74.2 percent of pa-

tients who used only local pharmacies.

Add to that mix the government benefit payments and other checks, bills received and paid by mail, financial statements, personal correspondence, advertising mail, newspapers and magazines, and you have the basic mix of mail that Americans know and now, in these trying times, have come to appreciate—indeed, depend on—even more.

In a very real way, these trends have created consumer habits and delivery methods that now are making it possible for letter carriers to attempt to slow the spread of the virus by supplying tens of millions of Americans with vital supplies that allow them to shelter at home.

A LIFELINE DURING A CRISIS

The Postal Service is the perfect infrastructure for bringing essentials to people sheltering in place, and it was ready from Day One. As the pandemic rapidly spread across the country and millions of Americans stayed home, the Postal Service has stepped in to serve many in new ways. From stimulus payments and food and household supplies to health information about the new and unfamiliar COVID-19 virus, many items necessary during this crisis have made their way to households through the mail.

Thanks to the growth of e-commerce, the infrastructure for receiving vital supplies by mail and for businesses to survive through mail delivery already was in place when the pandemic struck. Shoppers knew where and how to shop online, and tens of millions boosted their e-commerce orders immediately; many businesses either already shipped by mail or could



During the pandemic, people are now receiving medications by mail more frequently.

easily pivot to fulfillment by mail.

“We are the leading delivery service for online purchases,” USPS spokesman David Partenheimer said.

In fact, the central role of package delivery in modern life makes it difficult to imagine surviving a major pandemic without it. With e-commerce outlets fully prepared to fulfill the needs of a locked-down public combined with an economic shutdown, package delivery has surged as the virus spread. Many brick-and-mortar stores have closed under lockdown orders, while nervous shoppers stayed away from stores that were deemed essential and remained open, such as grocery stores. As shortages in some supplies like toilet paper and cleaning supplies emerged, shoppers turned to e-commerce to find them.

“The parcels are through the roof,” said **Mark Seitz**, president of Maine Merged Branch 92, who also serves as

Maine State Association president.

The mail-order prescription business took off at full speed as the pandemic took hold.

Many Americans rely on daily medication, and a large proportion of them are older, less mobile and more vulnerable to the COVID-19 virus. Though some already were relying on convenient mail-order delivery to connect them with pharmacies, the pandemic led to a surge in medication delivery by mail. In the last week of March, as lockdowns gripped the country, the volume of mailed prescriptions rose 21 percent compared to the previous month, according to pharmaceutical business analysts.

To help medication users get their supplies while staying home safely during the pandemic, some states and health plans waived refill limits to encourage patients to get 90 days of drug supplies rather than the usual 30 days.

Relaxing Medicaid policies also helped to boost mail-order medication—eight states eliminated a requirement that Medicaid recipients give a signature, in person, to get prescriptions filled, so as to encourage mail order in the pandemic.

Pharmaceuticals are an important part of the parcel growth, according to **Pat Van Egeren**, president of Green Bay, WI Branch 619. “I do see more medicine going through the mail stream,” Van Egeren said. “Individuals are feeling more secure, more safe, about it. And how much more convenient can it get? It’s especially important today because people are quarantined or fearful of going out.”

Analysts say that many new mail customers are likely to stay with mail delivery even when the pandemic ends, because they will be accustomed to the convenience. And, if and when in-home self-test kits for COVID-19 become available, many Americans may both receive and return test kits by mail.

Many Americans also are looking to the mail for financial help during the pandemic. The federal government has used the mail this year to deliver emergency economic stimulus payments.

Though the government sends most routine benefit payments through electronic payments—direct deposit to bank accounts or to debit cards—the economic stimulus payments enacted by Congress in March showed that the mail remains essential for reaching millions of Americans with vital payments like the stimulus.

Immediately after President Trump signed the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act on March 27, the Internal Revenue Service (IRS), which was tasked with making

direct payments to millions of American households to boost the economy and provide relief as the pandemic spread, got to work.

The IRS was able to send the bulk of the payments—120 million—by direct deposit using its prior tax payment records. But the agency still had to reach taxpayers with no direct-deposit information—some perhaps with no bank accounts at all—and also some Americans who had never filed tax returns. That added up to an additional 38.7 million payments requiring mailing paper checks or debit cards—a total of \$62 billion in payments.

THE MAIL MIX CONVERGES IN 2020

The mail composition during this critical time also includes items that were timed for the calendar but just happened to coincide with the pandemic—and have contributed to making 2020 a year to remember as we ease and deliver the mail. Taken together, the events of this year serve as a reminder of the importance the mail has in both personal and public life.

Every election year (even-numbered years) brings a surge of mailings from candidates and independent political groups, and that is particularly so in 2020. The advantages of mail really shine in election campaigns: Mail is proven to be effective and trustworthy with voters, more likely to attract attention and make a lasting impression, and one of the most cost-effective ways to reach voters directly in a given legislative district.

Moreover, each election, especially the every-four-year presidential contests, seems to bring record levels of spending by campaigns and other groups, fueling a flood of mail pieces.

Campaigns spent more than half a billion dollars on mail on the midterm elections in 2018. In this high-stakes presidential election year, spending could go far higher.

Of course, this is no ordinary election year. Given the need to avoid large gatherings to control the spread of the virus, many states have changed their laws to expand access to voting by mail. The COVID-19 crisis has placed an even-greater responsibility on the Postal Service to assist with the most important feature of our democracy—the ability of people to choose their political leaders.

Combine the presidential election year, the pandemic and the heated political climate, and the impact is clear, including in a remote area of Kansas where the closest city is 200 miles away. With a hard-fought Senate primary battle in her part of western Kansas, speckled with small towns,

During an election year, letter carriers deliver a lot of political mail.



Garden City, KS Branch 1412 President **Amanda Beckley** said, “We saw, to certain voters, as many as seven pieces [of political mail] a day.”

Before 2020, voters in many states had at least some access to voting by

mail, and voters were slowly embracing it. Nationwide, the proportion of votes cast by mail has grown steadily in presidential election years, from 7.8 percent in 1996 to 20.9 percent in 2016.

This year, concerns about the risks of in-person voting have led many states to broaden their access to voting through the mail. Some simply eliminated restrictions on absentee voting by request of the voter; others will mail ballots to all voters without waiting for a request.

Voting by mail has broad public support—in a Pew Research Center survey in April, seven in 10 adults said that anyone who wants to vote by mail should be allowed to do so. To date, states have opened up their election procedures to the point that at least 77 percent of the nation—181 million voters in 41 states—will have access to voting by mail this fall without being required to state a specific reason, according to a *Washington Post* analysis.

That includes 85 million people in 14 states that automatically will mail either ballots or applications for mail-in ballots to every voter.

NALC supports efforts to broaden access to voting by mail. Several state associations and branches have successfully advocated for voting by mail in their states. NALC also participates in the efforts of the National Vote at Home Institute and Coalition, a group advocating for vote-by-mail in every state. (For more information, see the May issue of *The Postal Record*.)

This year also is a census year.

While the U.S. Census Bureau, charged with counting everyone in the United States every 10 years, now encourages respondents to fill out their census forms on its website, the agency started the census process with a mailing to almost every household this spring. The mailing gave recipients the option of sending their response by mail. Those census-driven mailings

boosted mail were a significant generator of mail volume and revenue in the first quarter of this fiscal year, USPS reported.

LETTER CARRIERS TAKE THE PULSE OF THE MAIL

Most of these facts and figures about this year's mail trends don't surprise letter carriers who see the changes up close.

Maine's Seitz says that the surge in parcels is requiring some carriers to go out on their routes three or four times to keep up. And small parcels and rolls (SPRs), items under 2 pounds and smaller than a shoebox, seem to be leading the pack.

Despite their small size, SPRs are another kind of burden because they are cased like flats. "They take longer to case," Seitz said, because of their size.

In his 20 years of carrying mail in Wisconsin, Van Egeren has watched parcel volume grow and flats shrink steadily. When he started, he typically handled one or two small bags of parcels, not entire truckloads. This year, along with a larger surge in parcel volume, he has noticed that more postal patrons are sending packages in addition to receiving them.

"I get more carrier pickups—from businesses and homes—on my route, especially during the pandemic," Van Egeren said. "People are reluctant to go to the post office," due to fear of the virus.

EFFECTS OF THE PANDEMIC ON THE SERVICE

On Aug. 7, the Postal Service's financial report for the third quarter of Fiscal Year 2020, covering April, May

Election ballots will be part of the mail mix in greater numbers than ever before.



Residents are expressing their gratitude for the essential work letter carriers are doing.

and June, showed an extraordinary increase of 49.9 percent in package volume compared to the same three months in 2019—a jump from 1.4 billion packages to 2.1 billion. In practical terms, this means that letter carriers delivered an additional 708 million packages in that period—or several dozen extra packages for each carrier per day.

“It’s Christmas every day,” Beckley said. “The flats are light, but the parcels are ridiculous.”

As USPS stated in a press release about the quarterly report, “(T)he Postal Service anticipates that these trends will continue given the surge in e-commerce as many Americans stay home due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The Postal Service has and will continue to serve its customers during this crisis through the delivery of medicine, essential consumer staples, benefits checks, and important information, but does not expect its package revenue growth over the medium to long term to make up for its losses in mail service revenue caused by COVID-19.”

Over the same three-month period, marketing mail plummeted by 36 percent and First Class mail fell by 8 percent, with those trends—exacerbated by the pandemic-related economic shutdown—taking a toll on overall postal finances.

The decline in First-Class and marketing mail is a reminder that the Postal Service is sensitive to economic ups and downs and that, since it normally is self-supporting and does not receive taxpayer funds, it should get relief from Congress like other businesses have. NALC and its sister postal unions and their members are working hard to secure an emergency appropriation from Congress to assure the financial

health of the Postal Service, an idea that enjoys strong public support.

LETTER CARRIER VALOR

None of this—the surge in package deliveries, the election-related mailings, the distribution of government checks and safety guidelines, the census correspondence, customer reliance on USPS to deliver essential supplies such as food and medications, the sheltering at home—would be possible without the hard work, bravery and skill of letter carriers throughout the country.

In one of the pandemic’s ultimate ironies, a federal agency enshrined in the Constitution because the Founding Fathers envisioned, accurately, that it would unite this vast land by connecting communities to one another while serving as a unifying force within communities, now is adding a new mission—protecting Americans by allowing them, temporarily, to distance and separate themselves from one another. Letter carriers are leading that effort, one aimed at protecting us now so we can reunite.

Whether they see the letter carrier making the rounds or only the mail that is left in the mailbox, Americans are expressing their gratitude by leaving messages in sidewalk chalk, on poster board, by social media or in letters to the editor of their local newspaper. (See the April and May issues of *The Postal Record* for more on this.) Meanwhile, ordinary citizens are reaching out to NALC to ask how they can help. For example, on Aug. 11 a resident of Hawaii called and, in a follow-up email, wrote, “I am writing to express my support for the NALC and the USPS. We appreciate all those



who have worked hard and with great dedication to provide all of us with uninterrupted mail services for more than 240 years. It is time now for us to return the countless favors of service you have provided.”

“It is difficult for the esteem in which the public holds letter carriers to rise, because it already is so high. And yet, this is exactly what is happening,” NALC President Fredric Rolando said. That is reflected in the polls, in the homemade signs posted in so many communities, in the editorials and articles in so many newspapers and other news outlets.

“As president of the National Association of Letter Carriers, I thought that my own pride in what letter carriers accomplish every day could not increase,” Rolando said. “And yet, as I see the risks, the challenges, the demands, the rise in packages and so much more, I am deeply impressed—though not at all surprised—by how letter carriers are responding.”

From individual residents to commentators to public officials, the praises of letter carriers are being sung far and wide.

“More than ever,” President Rolando continued, “letter carriers are heroes, they are being recognized as such, and their heroism will long be remembered by thankful customers and by a grateful nation.” **PR**