

Looking the part: The letter carrier uniform

Until 1955, carriers had to cover the cost of their uniforms from their own pockets. That year, the U.S. Post Office Department finally provided a uniform allowance (\$100 at the time) so that carriers would look their best while doing their jobs.

Letter carriers have worn uniforms to identify themselves and show their professionalism since shortly after the Civil War. Post offices had begun offering free home delivery of mail to bypass long lines at post offices—lines that had grown with family members eager for news from soldiers at war. Congress also wanted to give uniform manufacturers a new line of business after the war ended and demand for military uniforms dropped.

However, letter carriers were required to pay for the full cost of the uniform. This was a risky investment, because postal workers had no job security and were routinely fired after a presidential election so that the political friends of a new administration could take their jobs. When Postmaster General Arthur A. Summerfield decreed in 1955 that letter carriers should look more professional, he initiated the \$100 annual uniform allowance. The uniforms had to include labels certifying that the garment met postal specifications.

In 1971, when NALC gained collective-bargaining rights to represent letter carriers, uniforms became a subject of negotiations. Thanks to agreements negotiated with USPS by the union, carriers now have a larger uniform allowance as well as a say in the official uniform items available to them for purchase, and the allowance increases with each year of the agreement. The uniform program is

overseen for NALC by Director of Life Insurance James “Jim” Yates.

The National Agreement between NALC and the Postal Service that was finalized by an arbitration panel in 2013 granted CCAs the same uniform allowance as career carriers. Previously, transitional employees (TEs), the job category replaced by city carrier assistants (CCAs), had a smaller allowance. NALC negotiated to continue this policy in the current agreement, which was ratified in August of 2017. The allowance is currently \$464 annually, with an additional, one-time credit of \$107 when a CCA converts to career status.

Shopping for and buying the uniform items needed for all types of weather can take time and sometimes exceed the allowance, especially for carriers in extreme climate areas.

“As new carriers quickly learn, a letter carrier must have many uniform items,” Yates said. “You have to have something to wear to work while other items are in the laundry. You will need rain gear and perhaps heavy winter clothes and accessories. And good footwear is essential. The cost can add up.”

To help CCAs get started before they qualify for the allowance and have time to shop, many branches offer a uniform exchange that gives CCAs access to gently used and unwanted uniform items from veteran and retired carriers. This is another way the union helps new members start on the right foot and also makes the uniform allowance go a little further. If you need additional help completing your full set of uniform items, check with your branch to see if hand-me-down pieces are available.

A new CCA in his or her first appointment does not qualify for the

uniform allowance until 90 workdays or 120 calendar days of employment have been completed, whichever comes first. When a CCA qualifies for their first uniform allowance, that date becomes their uniform allowance anniversary date: the date each year they will receive their new allowance.

USPS provides the allowance to CCAs in the form of a letter of authorization, or voucher, that a carrier uses to buy uniform items. The voucher is valid only for purchases from vendors licensed by USPS. A list of all authorized Postal Service uniform vendors is located on the Labor Relations website—see the Uniform Program from the Blue Page or LiteBlue under My HR, and look for the link for Uniform Program.

CCAs can carry over unspent money from the allowance into their next appointment, though they cannot use it during the five-day break in service. However, any of the money that went unspent when you reach your next anniversary date is forfeited.

Management is to provide the letter of authorization within 14 days of a CCA becoming eligible for a uniform allowance. Any CCA who does not receive a letter of authorization within that period should contact his or her steward.

When CCAs are converted to career, their uniform anniversary date remains the same. A significant change to the uniform-purchasing process when becoming a career employee is that you are issued a preloaded debit card. This card is automatically loaded with your allowance and may be used to purchase uniforms from licensed vendors. And remember, you receive additional credit to your uniform allowance for your first allotment as a career employee.

For more information, consult the *NALC Letter Carrier Resource Guide* at nalc.org/resourceguide or through the NALC Member App. To order a printed version, log on to the Members Only section of the NALC website, click on the checkbox below the image of the guide, and a copy will be mailed to your NALC address of record.

“Our uniforms are so important to how we do our jobs and how the public perceives us,” Yates said. “They also protect us from sun, wind, rain, snow and cold. Use your allowance wisely. Check out what other carriers are wearing, and ask experienced carriers what you may need as the seasons change.”

In addition to providing a uniform allowance, the National Agreement gives NALC a voice in the uniform items we can buy with the allowance, by establishing a joint uniform committee composed of NALC and USPS representatives. Yates heads the committee for the NALC.

Through the committee, USPS and NALC may agree to any changes or additions to the uniform program. The committee considers many factors in uniform design, because a uniform works much harder than casual clothes. A letter carrier’s uniform needs to be tough enough to survive the wear-and-tear from the route and frequent laundering. Uniform items using modern fabrics can’t sacrifice appearance for comfort. And, it all has to fit into a carrier’s uniform allotment, which can run out quickly.

The uniform committee meets at least once every three months and has jurisdiction to consider all non-cost matters pertaining to the uniform program. Currently, the uniform committee is exploring new, moisture-wicking

fabrics for polo shirts and cargo pants. Letter carriers have expressed an interest in both of these items for some time.

Keeping up with clothing technology is about more than looking and feeling good; uniforms also are a safety issue. They help protect carriers from the many hazards of their jobs, including heat, sun and cold, as well as foot injuries.

Details matter in uniform design. Take shorts, for example: Will they come in enough sizes to fit any carrier? Do they have enough pockets of the right size and shape? Will they remain comfortable through a day’s work, while keeping the carrier looking neat and professional? Will they last long enough to justify their cost?

Even color and fabric style involve functionality. Dark clothes attract the sun’s heat. Some fabrics protect against harmful ultraviolet (UV) sunlight; others offer little protection. Some colors and styles, such as solid versus striped patterns, hide stains or sweat better than do others.

The uniform committee takes time to get it right, because any mistakes in fit or design would affect thousands of letter carriers.

When an item is adopted by the uniform committee, USPS publishes its specifications for the approximately 200 vendors that the Postal Service licenses to supply uniforms. USPS adds the item to the list of approved items in the *Employee and Labor Relations Manual (ELM)*. And, of course, vendors add it to their catalogues and websites.

The committee also deals with issues like changes in fabric availability. If a



certain fabric used in a garment is discontinued by suppliers or is no longer made in the United States, the committee must decide what to do, including considering options such as discontinuing the item or finding an alternative. USPS requires that U.S.-made items be used whenever they are available.

Resolutions are another way that letter carriers have a voice on uniform issues. Over the years, NALC national conventions have adopted many resolutions related to uniforms, calling for things like approval of new fabrics and the cargo pants mentioned above, additional cold-weather gear and sun-protective clothing to approving shoes that use Velcro instead of laces.

Any letter carrier can propose a resolution to his or her branch. If the branch adopts it and sends it to the NALC Executive Council, the delegates at the next national convention will vote on it.

“Our uniforms matter. They protect us from the elements, keep us comfortable and project our image,” Yates said. “NALC will always work to improve them so that letter carriers can look and feel their best every day.” **PR**