

# Happy New Year



**Fredric V. Rolando**

**T**he new year is starting off a lot like last year—but positive change is coming. Indeed, as we went to press, the total U.S. death toll from COVID-19 surpassed 300,000 (nearly 1 out of every 1,000 people) and the fatality rate surged past 3,000 per day. Offsetting the fear, sadness and exhaustion we all feel is the news that the first of several COVID-19 vaccines was approved by the Food and Drug Administration in December. Over the next six to nine months, hundreds of millions of Americans will be vaccinated, hopefully putting an end to this public health crisis. NALC will urge Washington policymakers to include postal employees among the front-line essential workers to be given priority on inoculations.

In the meantime, I urge every letter carrier to remain vigilant against the dangers of the virus—wear your masks, use your hand sanitizer, and maintain your social distance. We are not exactly sure how much longer this crisis will last, but we must protect ourselves and our families for as long as it takes to end this pandemic.

We also must contend with the uncertainty surrounding the economic recovery from the pandemic. Sadly, the Senate failed to act on COVID-19 relief legislation for more than seven months after the House of Representatives passed the Health and Economic Recovery Omnibus Emergency Solutions (HEROES) Act in May. That bill called for \$25 billion for the Postal Service and hazard pay for letter carriers. The Senate declined to respond to the crisis as the recovery stalled, the use of food banks reached record levels, and almost a million workers each week continued to file for unemployment benefits.

Fortunately, as we approached the Dec. 31 expiration of special unemployment benefits, a bipartisan group of senators and representatives stepped up to offer a downsized compromise solution that passed in Congress (see page 5). The bill, which at press time had been sent to the president's desk, fell far short of what was needed, but it did convert the USPS's existing \$10 billion line of credit for COVID-19 response into a grant.

**On the bright side, the Biden-Harris administration has demonstrated its staunch support both for the Postal Service and the NALC's legislative agenda.** Consistent with that support, President-elect Joe Biden appointed my chief of staff to serve on his transition team, giving our union a voice in formulating the postal policy of the incoming administration (see page 5). The agency review team, to which he was appointed, is working to provide the White House with advice and policy options for

administrative and legislative actions affecting the Postal Service and the Postal Regulatory Commission (PRC).

Beyond the administrative and legislative support from the new administration, pending appointments will have a positive effect on letter carriers and working people in general. Among the most important appointments President Biden will make will be individuals to serve on the USPS Board of Governors. There currently are three vacancies that the president can fill. Under the law, the Board is responsible for the overall management of the Postal Service—it sets strategic policy on products, pricing and strategy while supervising the activities and performance of the postmaster general and the agency's executive management.

President Biden also will select the chairman of the PRC, a vitally important body that regulates postal pricing and service issues. Indeed, soon after the election, the PRC finally announced the result of the 10-year review of the rate-making process (see page 5). NALC is still going through the 500-page ruling, but the new rules appear to liberalize the strict price cap that has undermined the Postal Service's financial health for the past 13 years.

Meanwhile, the new administration will appoint dozens of officials across the government who will indirectly affect letter carriers and other working people. The men and women who run key agencies, such as the National Labor Relations Board, which guarantees the right to organize unions and enforces our nation's collective-bargaining law, and the Federal Mediation and Conciliation Service, which helps resolve labor-management disputes, are good examples. Hundreds of positions at the Department of Labor also will be filled, including secretary of labor, as well as key appointees to oversee our workers' compensation program and to manage the Occupational Health and Safety Administration (OSHA). The OSHA position is especially important, given the need for an emergency safety standard on infectious diseases like COVID-19. In all of these cases, NALC's voice is being heard both in the transition process and through the leadership of the AFL-CIO. We hope to help build the most pro-union administration in decades.

**As our active members vote this month on ratification of our new collective-bargaining agreement with the Postal Service** (see page 4), I also look forward to continued discussions with Postmaster General Louis DeJoy about our respective visions regarding the future of the Postal Service. I hope to have a detailed exchange on operational, legislative and strategic objectives for the coming year.

As always, NALC will continue to engage the Postal Service on efforts to improve working conditions and service to the American people, while searching for growth opportunities that can strengthen the Postal Service financially. In these discussions, I am confident that the postmaster general will recognize the essential role that city letter carriers play in the popularity and success of the U.S. Postal Service and in the overwhelming trust the public has in USPS.

Happy New Year, brothers and sisters.