

Carriers, COVID-19 and keeping safe



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As letter carriers, we are mindful of the usual suspects that can cause a workplace injury. We have always had to be careful in dealing with dogs, slippery surfaces and the myriad of other hazards that we encounter on a daily basis.

As essential workers, the coronavirus pandemic added yet another challenge. When the pandemic took off in March 2020, the NALC met with USPS officials to establish policies to combat the virus and protect workers on the job. While we worked at these measures, the lack of consistent crisis management at the highest levels of our government forced postal officials to scramble to get the necessary protective equipment to keep workers safe.

The earliest days of the pandemic took a heavy toll on our craft. While most coronavirus infections caused mild symptoms, some resulted in hospitalizations and, sadly, a number of deaths. As the year progressed, the virus's impact on letter carriers largely followed the trends in society as a whole.

By mid-December, more than 83,000 postal employees had been quarantined, with nearly 23,000 testing positive for COVID-19. As the normally hectic holiday season rolled in, there were more than 13,000 employees who had not returned to work. In our craft, 25,000-plus letter carriers were quarantined, with more than 7,000 testing positive.

Gary Degrijze has been a letter carrier in Brentwood, NY, for 27 years. He started feeling sick in mid-March, and ended up in the emergency room. Hospitalized for two and a half months, he spent most of that time on a ventilator and continues to suffer symptoms related to his infection.

"I've been healthy for the majority of my life," said Degrijze, who is a 16-year Army reservist.

However, months after his hospitalization for COVID-19, Degrijze still can't grasp a coffee cup handle. "I have limited strength in my right arm because of nerve damage," he said. "The doctors don't know how much strength and mobility in my arm and hand I will get back; it could take up to a year for my right hand to recover."

Lingering joint pain limits his ability to stand or walk for long, and his feet have residual pain as well. "It's like having plantar fasciitis," he described.

Despite being out of the hospital for months, he continues physical therapy two to three times a week. Doctors don't know if his arm and hand will ever fully heal.

"I have good and bad days," he said. "There are days I walk halfway around the block and start to feel a little out of breath."

While most people with COVID-19 recover and return to normal health, some patients have symptoms that can last for weeks or even months after recovery from acute illness. Even people who are not hospitalized and have only mild illness can experience persistent or late symptoms. A Centers for Disease Control and Prevention study released in July found that, even among COVID-19 patients aged 18 to 34 with no chronic medical conditions, 1 in 5 hadn't returned to their pre-coronavirus health two to three weeks after receiving a positive test result.

University of Oxford researchers published a study on Oct. 19 that found that 29 percent of patients they analyzed with moderate to severe COVID-19 had kidney problems two to three months after the onset of the disease. The study also found that 64 percent of patients had breathing problems, 60 percent had abnormalities in their lung tissues and 55 percent had significant fatigue.

Degrijze, who most recently has been working as the NALC member on a Dispute Resolution Team, expects to return to the team sometime this month. He appreciates the support he and his family received from his co-workers. In addition to donations of leave, postal employees arranged a parade of support in front of his house.

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Although the recent development of COVID-19 vaccines offers us some hope, it likely will take several months or more before we can return to some semblance of normalcy. It's important to remember that most people who have COVID-19 recover quickly. But the potentially long-lasting problems from COVID-19 make it even more important to reduce the spread of the disease by following precautions such as wearing masks, avoiding crowds and keeping our hands clean.

For those of you who are dismissive of mandates, Degrijze has this to say: "The virus is very real; it's not the flu. It affects different people in different ways. It's very frustrating to hear about people who don't take this seriously. People should follow state mandates to protect themselves, their family and friends."