



Carriers in the time of COVID-19

For new letter carriers, they've only known the job during the pandemic

We all know that working in a pandemic is not normal. We've cased and carried the mail as essential employees while taking precautions such as wearing masks, washing our hands frequently and disinfecting surfaces. We've avoided contact with postal customers and worked hard to keep up with a surge in package and election mail volume. All the while, we've worried about contracting a dangerous virus and sometimes cared for children schooled at home.

Unlike veteran letter carriers, though, those who started after COVID-19 arrived have never experienced the job without those factors. For them, learning how to navigate the pandemic is another part of learning how to carry the mail, on top of all the other skills they are mastering. For some, the Postal Service offered a new start after the pandemic took away jobs or businesses.

The Postal Record talked to some new carriers whose postal journey began during the pandemic and about how their jobs are going so far.

Restaurant cook finds a new start two blocks away

Like millions of restaurant workers, **Richard Allen** had no warning that a deadly virus would force him out of his job in March 2020. One day, he was doing fine as a cook at a restaurant in Detroit; the next day, he was on unemployment.

Allen stayed home and cared for his newborn daughter for a while, but the Detroit Branch 1 member needed to go back to work, and he knew the Post Office was a good place to look.

"I [had] worked at the Post Office before, as a mail handler," he said, referring to a stint as a seasonal employee from November 2019 to January 2020. His unexpected loss of the restaurant job turned into a new opportunity. "I was interested in seeing what being a carrier was like."

Allen found an opening at Detroit's College Park Post Office two blocks from the restaurant. He started training in November and just missed the main part of the Christmas rush—his

first day on the street was Dec. 26.

Working in close quarters with other people at the post office during the pandemic made the carrier anxious, but not for long. “I was a little bit nervous at first,” he said, but he soon realized that most of the day keeps him socially distant. “What we do as carriers is one of the most isolated jobs, when we’re out on the street. At the beginning of the day, everyone keeps their masks on.”

Allen has yet to experience the kind of personal interaction with his customers that most letter carriers have, and that some consider the best part of the job.

“I try to keep my distance as much as possible,” he said. “It’s probably not as personal as it is outside the pandemic.”

As a city carrier assistant (CCA) during a busy era for the Postal Service, Allen is working about 12 hours a day, six days a week. Nevertheless, now that Allen knows what carrying the mail is like compared to working as a mail handler, he’s happy and wants to stick with it as a career. “I prefer being a carrier,” he said. “I get to get some fresh air and walk around.”

Pandemic surprises former hotel worker seeking respect

Looking for a position where supervisors respected him more, **Dennis Kellum** left his job on the janitorial staff at an Embassy Suites hotel near Indianapolis to become a letter carrier in the nearby town of Fishers, IN. The Carmel, IN Branch 888 member



Richard Allen

started carrying the mail in early March of 2020, just as COVID-19 infections were reaching pandemic levels. Kellum had to learn the job and learn to stay safe from COVID-19 at a time when supervisors and trainers were themselves still learning about the virus.

“It’s a lot to take in,” he said, “but I never felt I was underprepared or in the dark.”

Despite the risk of working as an essential employee while learning a new job, Kellum said, his supervisors and fellow carriers have helped him make the best of the situation.

“For the most part, it’s been a smooth enough ride,” he said. “The thing I most appreciate is that, despite all the complications, [managers] understand it’s going to be a very different time.”

Several carriers in the Fishers Post Office have taken leave after contracting COVID-19. As a CCA, Kellum is working 10 hours a day, six days a week, but making up for absences of carriers on leave with COVID-19 infections has added to the pressure.

“It’s felt like peak season, but we’re making it happen somehow,” he said. “I’m just hoping that’s a hurdle we’re going to clear soon.”

For Kellum, anxiety about the possibility of infection was part of the job from the beginning, but the safeguards that managers set up in his station eased that feeling.

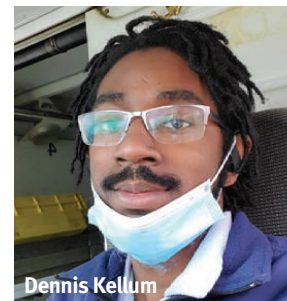
“They have been very much on top of strict COVID-19 restrictions,” he said. “I understand there are still going to be inherent risks, but I feel comfort and solace that they are doing all they can.”

Out on the street, “I’m avoiding people to the best of my ability,” Kellum said. The biggest challenge is going inside apartment buildings and businesses. “For the most part, I’m able to socially distance effectively.”

The danger of infection “always lingers in the back of my head,” he added, “but despite the danger, I’m still willing to put forth the effort and keep smiling.”

His role as an essential employee serving the community’s needs during the pandemic has given Kellum a boost.

“That’s what keeps me going—knowing that I’m doing something that helps the whole community,” he said.



Dennis Kellum

CCAs balance jobs, families and COVID concerns

Jamal Mosley picked up a satchel in February 2020 after quitting his job as a car salesman. The New City, NY Branch 5229 member wanted the steady pay and benefits that the Postal Service provides to support his newborn baby.

He quickly learned that working as a CCA involves long hours away from his family, but the pay is good. “When you get your paycheck,” he said, “it’s worth it.”

Mosley said his post office has taken the pandemic seriously and has tried to protect employees, including making masks and gloves available and putting hand sanitizer at every case. He credits NALC with staying on top of the issue of protection from infec-

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tion and providing information: “The union has definitely been helpful. They’ve been keeping us informed.”

Nevertheless, working as a front-line employee with the constant threat of infection took its toll, even at home.

“I sometimes didn’t want to be around my baby” after getting home from the post office for fear of infecting her, he said. “I didn’t want to put her in harm’s way.”

Because preventing infection is now baked into the job every day, from wearing a mask to avoiding close contact with customers, Mosley is used to it. “I don’t know how to do my job,” he said, “without trying to protect myself.”



Jamal Mosley

One of Mosley’s co-workers in New City, **Rashad Johnson**, also has family at home to think about. Johnson is helping to support his family—a wife and two children in school—by working

as a carrier.

In fact, the Post Office has proven to be a lifeline for Johnson. The non-emergency medical transportation company he had helped build was just beginning to succeed when the pandemic wiped out business, because most of the customers he used to drive from place to place stayed home for safety reasons.

Suddenly jobless, Johnson scrambled for new work. “I knew unemployment wasn’t going to last forever,” he said. With the help of a neighbor who worked for the Postal Service, he applied to be a carrier and started as a CCA in May 2020.

“I actually like delivering mail,” he

said. “I get a good feeling. But it’s discouraging at times seeing other people working at home and having to leave my family.”

His two children have spent most of the pandemic at home, participating in school remotely. His wife can work from home some days, so between the two of them, they manage to care for their children during the school week.

Johnson also notices the effects of social distancing on the job when customers don’t want him to get too close. But he has taken to the job and says he will stick with it. “Once you get to know what you’re doing, it’s habitual—you go on autopilot,” he said.

Carrier loves her job despite a crazy year

“I was just looking for something different,” Lexington, KY Branch 361 CCA **Kelsey Harrison** said about switching from retail management to carrying the mail.

She found it.

Hamilton started her new job in mid-April 2020 when businesses were shutting down and people were sheltering in their homes due to COVID-19. Working as an essential employee didn’t bother Hamilton, though. Instead, it boosted her sense of purpose.

“I knew that I needed to be out there providing service to customers,” she said.

Learning the job in the middle of a pandemic came with extra complexities. “When I started, with all the COVID-19 restrictions, I didn’t receive any on-the-job training or shadow days,” Hamilton said. “But after doing



Kelsey Harrison

the same routes consistently, I was able to catch on how to assess the DPS and flats and know where to go.”

On the other hand, the COVID-19 precautions at her station made her comfortable with the risks. “They were making sure we had gloves and

face masks—we always wear our face masks,” she said. Her fellow carriers and other staff have kept up with wiping down vehicles and indoor surfaces as well. “You can see the cleaning taking place.”

Hamilton soon noticed that many customers were wary of close contact. “Last year, a lot of people would avoid coming to the mailbox.” But a few would come closer, even approaching her truck, and that gave her a chance to greet them—with caution. “I would just put the mask on and still be sociable, while respecting our social-distance guidelines.”

The unusual circumstances of her first year on the job—the pandemic, and the surge in packages and election mail that it caused—didn’t put her off. She’s looking forward to converting to a career carrier.

“I love this job,” she said. “I love providing service to customers. I love being outside all day. I love it at the end of the day when my truck is empty—that’s a good feeling.”

As COVID-19 slowly loses its grip, Hamilton is looking forward to even better times. “The regulars told me that last year was not a typical year,” she said. “I dealt with all kinds of things—the pandemic, the election—and now I’m starting to see how things are getting back to normal. It’s totally different from last year already.” **PR**