

Vehicle news and updates



Christopher Jackson

This month marks the beginning of spring, and with it comes better weather and brighter days for many letter carriers. I had hoped the spring of 2021 would bring with it a USPS announcement of a contract award for the Next Generation Delivery Vehicle (NGDV) intended to replace the aging fleet of Long Life Vehicles (LLVs). Unfortunately, at the time I am writing this article, no contract for the NGDV has been awarded, and the reliability and supply of LLVs continues to decline rapidly.

Additionally, in January, President Biden issued an executive order expressing a commitment to the development of a federal energy sustainability effort. The order includes a plan for “clean and zero-emission vehicles for Federal, State, local, and Tribal government fleets, including vehicles of the United States Postal Service.” At this time, it’s uncertain if this executive order will affect the NGDV program and the awarding of a contract; however, we will continue to update the membership as more information becomes available. Be sure to check nalc.org, the NALC Member App and our social media outlets regularly for updates on the NGDV program.

To fill the gap created by the reduction in LLVs, in May of 2020, USPS announced the purchase and deployment of the Mercedes Metris right-hand drive commercial off-the-shelf vehicles into the delivery fleet. USPS anticipated deployment of approximately 3,392 Metris vehicles to city delivery routes during calendar year 2020, with an additional 3,700 Metris vehicles in 2021. As some time has passed since the initial deployment and letter carriers have become more experienced with the Metris, I have received a few reports of safety concerns regarding these vehicles.

One concern that was reported to me was an issue with the steering wheel failing to lock when the key is removed from the ignition. The concern was that this failure of the steering wheel to lock would allow the wheels to turn, even though the vehicle was turned off and the key removed, causing a possible rollaway, runaway situation despite the wheels being properly curbed. NALC asked USPS to investigate the issue and provide any results from the investigation.

In February, my staff and I, along with NALC Director of Safety and Health Manuel Peralta Jr., met with represen-

tatives from the USPS Engineering, Safety, Fleet Management and Labor Relations departments to discuss this issue. During the meeting, USPS stated that the Metris steering wheel assembly is not designed to lock when the key is removed, and this is not a manufacturing defect. According to the Postal Service, locking of the steering wheel, which used to be the standard in the automotive industry, was to prevent theft of the vehicle and was never intended to be a safety feature.

With advances in technology, the automotive industry has determined that there no longer is a need for the steering wheel to lock and has eliminated this feature on most new vehicles, including the Metris. USPS says that it does not think that movement of the steering wheel creates an increased risk for rollaway, runaway incidents if letter carriers follow the proper procedures for parking the vehicle and curbing the wheels. NALC has scheduled a site visit to a local delivery unit to research this issue and has requested a copy of the Metris operator’s manual to review the manufacturer’s specifications.

I also have received reports related to the Metris involving incidents of extreme tire wear. Some carriers report that the tires on the Metris are wearing unevenly and require attention or replacement more frequently than do other delivery vehicles. During the previously mentioned meeting in February, USPS reported that substantial tire wear is a universal problem on all USPS delivery vehicles, not just the Metris. The tires that come standard on the Metris are designed for passenger vehicles and are not intended for the extensive usage and curbside delivery road conditions. USPS indicates that extreme tire wear is a common problem when new vehicles are deployed.

In the past, specific tires have been custom designed for USPS usage on the LLVs. USPS is currently in discussions with a major tire manufacturer to acquire light delivery truck-type tires that are more suited to the road conditions and usage of the USPS delivery fleet.

In closing, I want to remind letter carriers of the importance of daily vehicle inspections. You should closely inspect the tires, as well as the other items listed in USPS Notice 76, Expanded Vehicle Safety Check, while performing your daily inspection. If there is evidence of damage or unusual tire wear, carriers should complete PS Form 4565, Vehicle Repair Tag and report the issue to management for them to correct the situation.

Defects observed during these safety inspections may be the key to preventing an injury to yourself or someone else. I encourage you to take the necessary time each day to perform a proper vehicle inspection, and to please stay safe.