



News from Washington

Congress expected to continue work on postal reform



With the House of Representatives and the Senate back from August recess, we expect Congress to pick up where it left off on the Postal Service Reform Act (H.R. 3076/S. 1720).

H.R. 3076 advanced out of the House Committee on Oversight and Reform in May. Since that time, Chairwoman Carolyn Maloney (D-NY) and Ranking Member James Comer (R-KY) have been working with stakeholders to finalize technical modifications to the bill.

In the Senate, the Homeland Security and Government Affairs Committee has yet to consider S. 1720, but Chairman Gary Peters (D-MI) and Ranking Member Rob Portman (R-OH) have been coordinating with the House on the identical measures. S. 1720 has attracted 13 Republican co-sponsors, which means that if all 50 Democrats support the measure along with those 13 Republicans, the bill could surpass the 60-vote threshold needed for passage.

As a reminder, the legislation achieves key priorities for NALC, including:

- The repeal of the mandate that the Postal Service pre-fund decades' worth of retiree health benefit premiums.
- A reform of the Federal Employees Health Benefits (FEHB) Program to maximize Medicare integration.
- Language to permanently protect six-day mail delivery.

Both chambers have focused on technical changes to the legislation to ensure that the future integration with Medicare is seamless. This careful coordination has required guidance from the Office of Personnel and Management, the Office of Manage-

ment and Budget (OMB) and the Center for Medicare and Medicaid Service (CMS). In addition, these agencies are collaborating with the House Committee on Ways and Means, the House Committee on Energy and Commerce, and the Senate Finance Committee to ensure that final language can be legally adhered to.

NALC has been working directly with all involved to ensure that the final legislation benefits active and retired letter carriers. We also have been actively pushing back against false claims regarding the legislation. As we navigate our way to the finish line, other congressional matters, such as the Sept. 30 deadline to raise the national debt limit, the funding of government agencies for Fiscal Year (FY) 2022 and the president's "Build Back Better" agenda to invest in the nation's infrastructure, could interfere with the timeline for passage of postal reform. Letter carriers are encouraged to contact their members of Congress, using the action center found on the "Government Affairs" section of nalc.org, and ask representatives and senators to co-sponsor H.R. 3076/S. 1720 as we work to keep up the positive momentum on this important bipartisan legislation.

House passes combined FY 2022 appropriations bill, maintains six-day mail delivery

Prior to its summer break, the House passed the Defense, Commerce, Justice, Science, Energy and Water Development, Financial Services and General Government, Labor, Health and Human Services, Education, Transportation, Housing, and Urban Development Appropriations Act, 2021 (H.R. 7617), which

provides fiscal year funding to the majority of the federal government through Sept. 30.

Financial Services and General Government legislation has broad jurisdiction over agencies or entities, such as the Internal Revenue Service, the Treasury Department, the OMB, the General Services Administration, the Small Businesses Administration, the Securities and Exchange Commission, the District of Columbia and the U.S. Postal Service.

As it relates to the Postal Service, NALC works hard each year to ensure that our longstanding language preserving six-day mail delivery is in place. Once again, those efforts were successful due to the hard work of letter carriers in educating members of Congress on both sides of the aisle.

In addition, appropriators included an amendment that would prevent the Postal Service from implementing the Expedited to Street Afternoon Sortation (ESAS) pilot program and from making changes to services standards that were in effect on July 31, 2020. NALC filed a national-level grievance on the implementation of the ESAS program. That grievance was resolved in August 2020, making clear that any changes such as those included in the ESAS program must comply with our collective-bargaining agreement.

The House-passed measure also included an amendment to provide \$2 million to the Postal Service for a postal banking pilot program, and funding for the Postal Service Office of Inspector General to “encourage the Postal Service” to investigate mail delivery issues in Chicago. NALC will monitor all postal-related measures as the Senate continues its work regarding the appropriations process.

Senate passes budget resolution, paving way for massive infrastructure investments

Prior to departing for summer recess, the Senate passed the FY 2022 budget resolution. The 10-year \$3.5 trillion framework drafted by Senate Democrats includes funding for improved family services, health care, education and combatting climate change to complement legislation investing in the nation’s physical infrastructure, which also is currently moving through Congress. The budget resolution sets top-level spending guidelines and provides instructions for Senate committees. The instructions reinforce President Biden’s “Build Back Better” agenda, a three-part plan to rebuild the U.S. economy. The successful passage of the budget resolution in August paved the way for Democrats to use the so-called “budget reconciliation” process to protect the legislation from a GOP filibuster in the Senate.

In the budget resolution, the Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee would receive \$37 billion in new funding. This funding would be used to fully electrify the federal vehicle fleet, including the Postal Service’s fleet. It also would be deployed for federal building rehabilitation projects, cybersecurity infrastructure, border management investments and other federal investments related to clean energy procurement.

Overall, the budget resolution aims to combat climate change with \$198 billion allocated to the Senate Committee on Energy and Natural Resources for rebates on clean energy and weatherized homes, federal procurement of energy-efficient materials, and climate research. It includes

\$726 billion for the Committee on Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions, which would provide universal pre-K schooling for 3- and 4-year-old children, tuition-free community college, and an increase in the maximum amount of Pell grants for higher education. The Committee on Banking, Housing and Urban Affairs would receive \$332 billion to create and preserve affordable housing, and the Committee on Finance would receive funding to promote paid family and medical leave, Medicare expansion, increased child tax credits and more. Additionally, \$18 billion would be allocated to the Committee on Veterans’ Affairs for upgrades to VA facilities.

“For too many decades, Congress has ignored the needs of the working class, the elderly, the children, the sick and the poor. Now is the time for bold action. Now is the time to restore faith in ordinary Americans that their government can work for them, and not just wealthy campaign contributors,” Senate Budget Chairman Bernie Sanders (I-VT) said after introducing the budget resolution. The passage of the budget resolution, which outlines spending over the next 10 years, came after the Senate passed a 10-year, \$1 trillion bipartisan physical infrastructure bill, both critical parts of the White House’s agenda.

The House had not yet voted as of press time on the budget resolution, and Democrats will have to continue to navigate within their own party to get the legislation through Congress. The House cut short its summer recess to return the week of Aug. 23 to begin work on the budget resolution and reconciliation. After the House passes the budget resolution, committees in both houses of

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Congress can begin drafting their portions of the bill. These committees would need to hold markups during the first two weeks of September to meet the non-binding Sept. 15 budget resolution deadline.

If the Senate and the House are able to work out any differences between their infrastructure and reconciliation bills, Congress as a whole will potentially consider these major pieces of legislation in late September or early October. NALC will continue to monitor these bills as they move through Congress.

Safer Federal Workforce Task Force issues updated COVID-19 guidelines

On Jan. 25, President Biden established the Safer Federal Workforce Task Force to oversee the implementation of COVID-19 workplace safety plans across the federal government.

In late July, the task force updated its COVID-19-related workplace guidelines. In the guidelines, the administration urged all Americans, including all federal workers, who are eligible for the vaccine to get vaccinated. Under new guidelines, onsite federal employees and contractors must confirm that they are fully vac-

nated with a signed attestation, or they will be considered non-vaccinated when applying the new guidance.

The guidelines do not require adherence by independent agencies such as the Postal Service; however, the administration strongly encouraged independent agencies to comply.

As *The Postal Record* went to press, NALC was in discussion with USPS regarding the task force guidelines and recent Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recommendations to ensure that USPS policy prioritizes and maximizes the safety of letter carriers and other postal employees. **PR**

The slow march back to in-person branch meetings

In the more than 18 months since the COVID-19 pandemic altered the way we think about group gatherings, NALC branches around the country have been forced to get creative to ensure that their members were still able to participate in union business and activities. Now, with many states permitting larger gatherings once again, even as the situation continues to evolve, we spoke to several branch presidents to find out how they were adjusting, and how they were keeping their members informed and engaged throughout the pandemic.

Some branches have been more hesitant to go back to normal, especially with the rise of new coronavirus variants and the return of mask regulations from some city governments, along with federal guidance on safety measures. Using a variety of strategies, officers and members have been collaborating and listening to health experts to determine how and when to return while still staying safe.

When states initially imposed regu-



lations on gatherings, many branches had to pause their in-person meetings. After the pandemic was declared in March 2020, “we went a couple of months without having meetings at all,” Camden, NJ Merged Branch 540 President **Chuck Goushian** recalled. Determined to stay in touch with members, Branch 540 officers looked into and were able to arrange for the general membership meetings to be held over Zoom by that summer.

Other branches also switched to the online platform. “Last year, in the summer, we were holding in-person meetings in the parking lot,” Boulder, CO Branch 642 President **Dave**

Negrotti explained. “But when it got too cold in the winter, we started doing Zoom meetings.”

Many of the virtual meetings went well—“we actually have higher attendance [with Zoom],” Negrotti said. But overall, most of the branch officers agreed that the online gatherings were no match for the connection formed in person. “I enjoyed having that mute button,” Goushian said with a laugh. “But it’s not the same—you don’t have that give-and-take. There’s a tangible energy [in person] that brings everyone closer together.”

Joe Rodgers, president of Philadelphia, PA Branch 157, agreed. The

Zoom meetings with shop stewards for his branch were “well attended” and “productive,” he said. But still, “I don’t think there’s anything that can replace an in-person meeting,” Rodgers added.

That is why many branch presidents and members leaped at the opportunity to return to in-person meetings. In Ohio, when the mask mandate was lifted in June for those who had been vaccinated, Toledo, OH Branch 100 President **Michael Hayden** said, “we started planning.”

The Toledo branch was able to have, that same month, its first in-person general membership meeting since the pandemic began. “It’s...incomparable, speaking when there’s no crowd, or speaking to a phone rather than people,” Hayden said. “It felt right to be back at the podium. And it seems like people were happy to see each other again.”

Rodgers, meanwhile, said that while attendance at Branch 157’s first in-person meeting in June was slightly lower than usual—“many of the retirees were not present,” he explained—he was pleased to see that about two-thirds of the regular attendees showed up.

With the in-person meetings going well, many branches also are exploring their ability to return to group activities and fundraisers. **Stanley Taylor**, who runs a group for retired members out of New Orleans, LA, said that after enough members felt sufficiently comfortable to return to physical meetings, the retired members were equally excited to put on the annual Branch 124 Retirees Seafood Boil, which was held in June. “It’s an annual event we all look forward to,” Taylor said. “It was very well attended, and we had a blast.”

Out west, the Boulder branch had a whole slate of outdoor activities it was hosting over the summer, including an outing to a Major League Baseball game and a picnic for members. “Things are definitely opening up,” Negrotti said.

Rodgers said that his members were eagerly anticipating the return of the Philadelphia Labor Day parade, which had switched to a virtual parade in 2020. However, given the rise of new variants and increased regulations, the branch was not fully back to normal. “Other events are being shelved,” Rodgers said, including the gold card luncheons for retirees, until it becomes safer to meet.

Given this recent spike in cases even among the vaccinated population, some branches have pushed back their return dates for in-person meetings. When Rhode Island began relaxing its COVID-19 restrictions over the summer, Providence, RI Branch 15 President **Ingrid Armada** immediately reached out to the landlord of the hall where the branch hosts its general membership meetings, and discussed plans to return in person in September.

“Things were looking better than they are now,” she said, but as it is, “I don’t know that it’d be a wise thing to do.” Armada says she plans to monitor the situation closely, but that she would like to see even better attendance than usual when the branch finally does get to meet in person. “There’s always that hope,” she said.

Other branches, also hesitant about COVID-19 infection rates in their areas, have decided to experiment with hybrid meetings, where some members meet in person and others conference in on Zoom.

For their branch’s first hybrid meet-

ing, Rockville, MD, Branch 3825 President **Kenneth Lerch** and Vice President **Charles Clark** worked together to make sure the meeting went smoothly. (Clark had previously been in charge of coordinating their Zoom-only meetings.) While there were a few technological hiccups, “it actually worked pretty well,” Clark said.

“Most people were in person, around 32 [members],” Lerch said, with about nine more joining virtually. Most of the virtual participants used Zoom because it fit better with their work schedule, he explained, but “at least one person was concerned about us meeting in one room—he wanted to be more safe.”

The hybrid format gave those carriers who weren’t “100 percent confident” about participating a chance to do so while still feeling comfortable, he said, while the rest could meet once again. “A lot of people like the comradery” of an in-person meeting, Lerch added.

At press time, the Boulder branch also was planning an upcoming hybrid meeting. “A lot of members said they were sick and tired of the Zoom meetings,” Negrotti said, so he decided to try bringing at least some of the members back in person. Of the members, Negrotti estimates that “a preponderance want to go back; some are more hesitant,” he said. “We’ll see how it goes—we’ll try it just to see.”

No matter where they were in the process of returning to in-person meetings, the branch officers who were interviewed agreed on one thing—they’re eager for the time when everything can actually go back to normal. “We’ve got a lot on our plate coming up in 2022,” Rodgers said. “I’m hoping everything works out, and we can be back to full business.” **PR**