

New year, same problems, more opportunities?



**Brian
Renfro**

Happy New Year! I want to express my appreciation to all letter carriers for your hard work during a challenging peak season—and a challenging 2021. Our world changed drastically in 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic. To a large degree, those changes carried over to 2021, and some problems were exacerbated.

The pandemic brought sudden and significant increases in parcel volume in 2020. To the surprise of some, that parcel volume has continued. The peak seasons of late November and December were particularly heavy and tested the Postal Service's capacity.

While some progress was made in the 2021 peak season with capacity, there are still challenges ahead. This parcel volume is going to continue to grow. We all know that letter carriers adapt, as we have for over a hundred years. Let's hope that our employer can continue to adapt operationally and keep up with this growing volume and changing business. We will continue to do our part at Headquarters, through our joint work with USPS representatives, to develop and implement solutions so that we can achieve what we all want to do—deliver for our customers.

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For our entire 132-year existence, NALC has unapologetically stood for and demanded certain things for our members. One of those that affects working conditions, contractual compliance and even the safety and health of our members is that there must be enough letter carriers to deliver the mail and comply with our collective-bargaining

agreement. Staffing issues have been present to some degree in some locations for as long as there has been a Post Office. These issues have been addressed in different ways over the years. Depending on the circumstances causing the issue, the solutions can differ.

First, I want to recognize that the COVID-19 pandemic has had an effect on staffing in many locations at various times. Daily, NALC tracks the number and the locations of letter carriers quarantined or off work for COVID-related reasons. As anyone would expect, we still have carriers who miss time at work due to COVID-19. Thankfully, that number is down significantly from what it was at the heights of the pandemic.

Another major issue has been retention of newly hired letter carriers. Over the last few years, significant steps and actions have been taken through collective bargaining to improve retention, including wage and benefit improvements and a defined path and maximum timeline to reach career status. Training for new letter carriers has been expanded to include more hands-on practice and teaching, as well as a longer training period. Recently, we have conducted pilot tests to improve the experience of newly hired letter carriers. While these pilots appear promising, the lasting impact is unknown. One thing is clear—the effects of these changes have not been enough to improve retention to a point where positive staffing improvements are made.

A growing problem is the Postal Service's inability to hire letter carriers in some geographic areas. Rising wages and a changing job market have created significant competition that isn't unique to USPS. There are proven solutions to this problem that we have negotiated in some areas. The areas experiencing these hiring issues are not going to get better after peak season. They are going to get worse as letter carriers attrite for retirement and other reasons, and as the Postal Service is unable to hire new letter carriers to replace them.

We have had ongoing discussions with USPS representatives for months about these staffing issues. We have collected and exchanged a ton of data. I appreciate the branches for providing details that are very important.

These staffing-related issues will almost certainly be some of the central issues in our next round of collective bargaining, scheduled to begin in the spring of 2023. In the interim, we have had some successes in jointly addressing staffing improvements with USPS in some locations. Despite months of work and discussion, there has not been an agreement as of press time for this *Postal Record* to address the locations where we simply can't hire.

In these locations, letter carriers need relief and postal customers need service—and they both need it right now. As we have for 132 years, we unapologetically demand both right now.