

Customers can be our greatest safety risk



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Every once in a while, during conversations held with letter carriers while traveling throughout the country on assignments for the NALC, I find myself inviting those around me to share their concern or idea in written form, so that I may incorporate it in my column.

During my recent attendance at the Michigan state convention, such a conversation resulted in

the following contribution from Morgan Harrington of Branch 246, Kalamazoo, MI. She explained her thought on writing the following column this way:

I have typed up an article about the dangers women face while at work. I tried to stay away from words that may be upsetting to some readers while still making the point how some coworkers, management and customers put women at a greater risk while delivering and how we can stand together to protect each other from this. I hope you like it, and I hope it empowers other offices to stand up against harassment in the workplace and out on the street. Thank you for giving me the opportunity to speak on this matter.

The following column was written by her.

Each day, when we show up to work, we are required to do the same job. We are required to lift 70 pounds, we must be able to carry a satchel of 35 pounds, we are required to be able to case at 18 and eight, but when it comes to our safety, are we being treated as equals? In the *EL-801 Handbook: Supervisor's Guide to Safety*, it states that "Supervisors or managers having primary responsibility for the wellbeing of employees must fully accept this principle."

When a letter carrier is bit by a dog, mail delivery is often suspended. The entire area may even become mounted to keep the carriers safe in the future. There are safety talks and guidelines and protective equipment we are all given, all the time, to ensure we are safe from dogs on our routes. All levels of management study how to keep employees safe from dangerous chemicals, animals, slip trips and falls, but what are they doing when a letter carrier reports a customer who is infatuated with them?

As men and women, we face different dangers when we are doing our jobs. As a City Carrier Assistant Academy instructor and an on-the-job instructor, I train all the new hires about the different dangers they may face while delivering the mail. Our men may face hostility from a husband who feels they're being too nice to their wife, and they believe they're flirting, but women often become the best part of some men's day. They watch for them to arrive, follow them, make unwanted advances, and just in general, overstep the boundaries of the carrier. Through my years with the Postal Service, I have spoken to many women on the dangerous situations they have been in while at work. Through these discussions I have found that an alarmingly high rate of our female co-workers are being harassed, threatened, stalked,

or even assaulted while just trying to make a living. I, myself, am no exception to this problem.

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In my nine-year career, I have been sexually harassed by a postmaster; threatened to be assaulted by a drunk man just so he could get arrested to be with his son; and a man, who first asked for directions, attempted to reach down my shirt and assault me and was arrested less than four hours later for sexually assaulting a woman, just two blocks away from my encounter, in broad daylight. I do not tell you this to invoke some kind of sympathy, but to bring awareness to a problem rarely spoken of and even more rarely prevented or handled within the post office.

When I first reported a postmaster sexually harassing me at work to my own female postmaster, she asked me for a statement and sent it to our manager of post office operations, who was also a female. I later received a call stating that, "It is just words, I don't know what the hell you're afraid of. Get back in there and do your job."

Later, after a discussion with the Office of the Inspector General, I found out there were more than 40 complaints of sexual harassment against that postmaster. I testified in federal court on behalf of the Postal Service to have this man removed from his position and from USPS. Only six

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other women felt comfortable enough to testify. He did lose his job, but why did it take 40 complaints?

The worst part was that the complaints were only found while he was being investigated about something else. Our complaints weren't their focus, they were just a smaller part of the "bigger" case. With all that USPS preaches to us about being safe and that "safety depends on me," why are they not protecting us from this very real danger?

“When this occurs to you or a co-worker, please use a PS Form 1767, Report of Unsafe Working Conditions or Practice, to report the customer and/or co-worker (management included). Let your steward know and provide them with statements about what occurred. If you feel you're in immediate danger, call 911 and remove yourself from the location or situation and then report to your supervisor and union steward.”

Each year in the United States, more than 450,000 women are sexually assaulted and 81 percent of women report to have been sexually harassed or assaulted while at work. Those are incredibly high rates. The USPS reports 13,000 injuries (38 percent) due to mail delivery. The chances that a female co-worker is or has been harassed or assaulted while at work is astronomically higher than our injury claims, yet injuries are what we are constantly trained to prevent. We must be vigilant, proactive and advocate for our safety in all aspects of our job: against the customer who is making us uncomfortable, the person who won't take "no" for an answer, the person who is making unwanted advances, and management that doesn't take it seriously.

When this happens to you or a co-worker, please use a PS Form 1767, Report of Unsafe Working Conditions or Practice, to report the customer and/or co-worker (management included). Let your steward know and

provide them with statements about what occurred. If you feel you're in immediate danger, call 911 and remove yourself from the location or situation and then report to your supervisor and union steward.

These dangers are very real. If you doubt it has happened in your office, just ask any of your female co-workers if they have ever experienced a potentially dangerous customer. I have yet to find one who can tell me they haven't in some way been followed, had to ward off unwanted advances, had to skip delivery to a location or pass off loops due to a customer who makes them uncomfortable or afraid for their safety. Male or female, this could happen to you. We must stand together to stop the harassment of our co-workers, by management or our customers.

The United States Postal Service has very strict policies on harassment, and we need to report all possible harassment, whether by a co-worker, management or customer. In my case, it was often my male co-workers and my wonderful customers who protected me from the harassment I encountered, not my management team. I wish I had known back then what I do now. Management has an obligation to protect us from all the dangers we encounter each day. Those aren't just words. The customer isn't "just weird." And you do *not* have to put yourself at risk when you feel their comments, advances or actions are putting you at potential risk of physical or emotional harm.

Brothers and sisters, as your director of safety and health, I ask you to look out for one another, step up to protect each other, report misconduct, harassment and potentially dangerous individuals and situations. We must take this seriously. We must stand together and advocate for safer working conditions, both in the office and out on the street. Take care of each other.

If you or someone in your office has been a victim of harassment and needs someone to talk to, the Employee Assistance Program (EAP) is available to you. Don't suffer and try to get through this on your own. Call 1-800-EAP-4-U or visit EAP4you.com for more information.

In January of 1984, while at the beginning of my USPS and NALC career, my branch suffered the loss of letter carrier Ida Jean Haxton. Haxton, a 30-year-old mother of two, lost her life at the hands of a customer. The station at which she worked was renamed in her memory.

The concerns expressed by Morgan are real and I thank her for sharing them with us.

Keep an eye on each other.