

Escalations via ECOMP and the new MTA position, Part 1



Regional Workers' Compensation Assistant Coby Jones

On March 10 at 8 p.m. EST, the Office of Workers' Compensation Programs (OWCP) initiated a new process inside ECOMP called case escalation. Within an hour, a claimant had escalated the first issue using the case escalation tab within ECOMP and by the following Wednesday morning, more than 340 issues had been escalated—all without any promotion or announcement from OWCP.

Historically, dealing with claim maintenance issues in accepted cases has been a deeply frustrating experience for both injured letter carriers and their health care providers. The NALC is optimistic that the new escalations process will vastly improve the experience for everyone involved with claim maintenance. So, what is the escalations process and how does it work?

The escalations process creates an expedited method for claimants and their representatives to submit inquiries involving six classes of issues that routinely arise in claims maintenance. Using the case escalation tab within ECOMP, claimants or their representatives can submit inquiries regarding unresolved issues in the following areas:

- Disability payment request for work loss
- Problems with medical bill payment
- Requesting authorization for medical procedure/treatment
- Requesting authorization for medication
- Health benefits or life insurance issue
- Overpayments

The medical treatment adjudicator

As part of the new process, OWCP has created a new position: the medical treatment adjudicator (MTA). We have learned through experience that many claims examiners are not fluent in the language of medical billing and authorization codes, causing endless frustration and delays for both claimants and their health care providers. The MTAs will be native speakers of this language and will oversee and expedite the resolution of medical authorization and billing issues. The role, duties and authority of the MTAs are discussed in detail in *FECA Circular No. 23-04* that was posted on OWCP's website on March 2.

The MTAs will, specifically, have authority in the following areas to deal with billing and authorization issues:

1. Accepting a more severe condition for a body part already accepted by the claims examiner, e.g., a case has been accepted for knee strain, but the

medical evidence shows the actual diagnosis was meniscal tear.

2. Accepting a more specific ICD code when the condition has already been accepted, e.g., a case has been accepted for S83.92XA sprain of unspecified site of left knee, but the provider is billing for S83.522A sprain of posterior cruciate ligament of left knee.
3. Accepting a condition with an ICD-10 code based on the already accepted ICD-9 code or updating an ICD-10 code that is no longer complete, e.g., M48.06 lumbar spinal stenosis was updated to include a final digit to become M48.061 lumbar spinal stenosis without neurogenic claudication or M48.062 lumbar spinal stenosis with neurogenic claudication.
4. Accepting a new body part where the link to approved treatment is clear and unambiguous, e.g., accepting a chipped tooth due to intubation during approved surgery if documented in operative report.
5. Authorizing diagnostic testing if the test is logically and causally related to the injury, e.g., a motor vehicle accident with a neck condition leading to tests for post-concussion syndrome.
6. Approving functional capacity evaluations, physical/occupational therapy, durable medical equipment and chiropractic care.
7. Authorizing surgery, including retroactive authorizations and carrier reimbursements, in cases where review by a district medical advisor (DMA) is not needed, e.g., carpal tunnel surgery or knee arthroscopy.
8. Approval of claimant travel and non-travel reimbursements.

OWCP also is establishing a separate phone number for health care providers to talk directly with an MTA in cases where CNSI (OWCP's bill processing contractor) is unable to handle an issue.

Other escalated issues that have also been historically handled by claims examiners will now be dealt with by other specialists:

- Prescription adjudicators (PAs) will handle escalated issues involving authorization for medications.
- Fiscal benefit specialists (FSBs) will handle issues involving federal health insurance or life insurance.
- Overpayment examiners (OPSS) will handle issues involving overpayments.

Claims examiners will still handle unresolved issues involving the payment of wage-loss compensation, including compensation issues elevated through the new escalations process. The following core duties remain restricted to claims examiners:

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Election Notices

Lancaster, Pennsylvania

In accordance with Article 14, Section 1 of the bylaws of Red Rose Branch 273, this is an official notice to all members of Branch 273. Voting will take place during the May 17 monthly meeting on proposed bylaws amendments.

Christian Oatman, Rec. Sec., Br. 273

Little Rock, Arkansas

This is an official notice to all members of Branch 35 that proposed changes to Article VI (secretary/treasurer as well as health benefits representative) and Article VII (funds) will be discussed at the general meeting on June 2.

The changes will be voted on at the general meeting at 7:15 p.m. on July 7 at the union hall, 10112 Chicot Road, Suite 212, Little Rock.

Chad W. Dollar, Pres., Br. 35

Massachusetts

This is an official notice to all delegates of the Massachusetts State Letter Carriers Association 92nd state convention. Nominations and elections will be held May 19-21 at the DoubleTree by Hilton in Hyannis for the following positions: president, vice president, secretary, treasurer, director of retirees, director of education and eight executive board members.

Members who have held, accepted or applied for a supervisory position are ineligible to run for or hold office for a period of two years after termination of such status.

Nomination and election (if necessary) will take place during the May 20 session of the convention. The installation of newly elected officers will take place later that evening.

Joe Desrosiers, Sec., MSLCA

New Hampshire

In accordance with Article IV of the *New Hampshire State Association Constitution* and bylaws, this is official notice that nominations and elections of state officers will be held during the 123rd New Hampshire state convention at Mill Falls at the Lake in Meredith June 1-4.

The offices which shall be open for election are president, vice president, secretary, treasurer, two congressional liaisons, one state legislative liaison, retiree trustee, five-year trustee, one-year trustee, and an additional one-year trustee.

Paul Nee, Sec., NHSALC

New Mexico

This is an official notice to all members of the state association of New Mexico that nominations will be accepted for state officers for president, vice president, secretary-treasurer, director of retirees, Southwest District president, Southeast District president, Northeast District president and Northwest District president.

Nominations will be on Friday, and election will be on Saturday, June 3.

Our state convention is going to be held in Hobbs June 1-3.

Gloria Baros, Sec./Treas., NMSALC

New York

This is official notice to all members of NYSALC that nomination and election for the following positions will be held at the New York state biennial convention July 9-11 in Brooklyn: president, vice president, secretary, treasurer, delegate-at-large, alternate delegate-at-large, director of legislation, director of education, director of retirees, and the eight executive board district positions: Tinnelly, Central, Southern Tier, Niagara Frontier, Hudson Valley, Tri-Boro, Long Island and Caribbean.

All elected positions will be nominated and voted on during this convention. Elected officers will serve a two-year term.

Jay Jackson, Sec., NYSALC

Northern Kentucky

This serves as official notice to all active and retired members of Branch 374 that nominations will be accepted for the following: president, vice president, secretary, treasurer, health benefits director, workers' compensation, retirement, three trustees and 17 delegates.

Nomination of officers shall take place at the regular union meeting in July at 6:30 p.m. at the Southgate Vets. Any member not in attendance at the July meeting must signify in writing prior to the adjournment of that meeting that he or she is desirous of becoming a candidate for election to an office in Branch 374.

Members who are in good standing and have attended nine or more meetings will be eligible to be a paid delegate and a nominated officer.

The election will be conducted by mail in September, and the installation of officers will be in October.

Election of shop stewards will be conducted separately and by secret ballot at each office in September. PTFs will vote at the office they are assigned to.

Mike Smith, Pres., Br. 374

Reno, Nevada

In accordance with branch bylaws, Article IX, Section 1 and Article 5 of the *NALC Constitution*, this is official notice to all members of Northern Nevada Branch 709 that nominations for the following officers will be held at the regular branch meeting on Oct 4 at the Carson City Plaza Hotel and Event Center, located at 801 South Carson St., Carson City: president, vice president, recording secretary, financial secretary/treasurer, health benefits representative, sergeant at arms, three trustees, and delegates to the 2024 national convention and the 2025 Nevada State Association convention.

According to Branch 709 bylaws, Article VIII, Section 2, nominees must be present, or present to the recording secretary prior to the October meeting, a written statement stating that he/she is willing to accept the position for which he/she is nominated. In addition, any member who is unavoidably detained from attending said meeting and contacts the branch within 24 hours shall be considered a candidate.

The terms of office for elected officers will be two years, beginning January 2024. The duly elected officers of this branch shall be delegates to all conventions in order of their election. The election will be conducted by secret mail ballot.

Shawn Wells, Rec. Sec., Br. 709

Salem, Virginia

This is official notice to all active and retired members of Branch 1605 that a special election for secretary will take place at our regular meeting at 6:30 p.m. on June 20 at 1716 W. Main St., Salem. Nominations will take place on May 16 at 1716 W. Main St., Salem. All members in good standing are invited to participate in the nomination and election process.

Dale Martin, Pres., Br. 1605

Texas

This is official notice of the nomination and election of officers for the Tex-

as State Association of Letter Carriers, which shall be conducted at the 2023 TSALC convention July 27-28. The nomination form shall be available to all delegates, as well as to each branch in Texas. Any regular member in good standing with their branch shall be eligible for any office of this association.

Delegates of their respective districts shall elect candidates running for a district board member position. No person shall nominate themselves for more than one office. Each candidate running for office must acknowledge and sign the nomination form. Every nominee must certify that he or she has not served in a supervisory capacity for the 24 months prior to being nominated.

Upon completion, the nomination form must be received by the election committee by July 27. This election will be conducted on July 28 at the Royal Sonesta Houston Galleria, 2222 W. Loop S., Houston. Only duly elected delegates by and for their branch may vote. Ballots will be counted at their weighted value (weighted value = total number of branch members, divided by the total number of delegates voting).

A branch may choose to vote unit rule for the entire membership, and this decision must be made in writing and received by the election committee by July 27.

Carlos Rodriguez Jr., Pres., TSALC

Western Wayne Co. Michigan

This is official notice to all members of Branch 2184 that nominations for branch president, executive vice president, vice president, recording secretary, financial secretary-treasurer, health benefits representative, mutual benefits representative, sergeant-at-arms, retirees' officer (who shall be a retired member), three trustees and all station stewards, as well as state and national convention delegates for the 2024-2026 term, will be taken at the regular branch membership meeting at 7:30 p.m. on Wednesday, Oct. 4, at the Branch 2184 office at 6969 Monroe St., Taylor. All branch officers, by virtue of their positions, are automatic delegates to the state and national conventions.

Elections will be conducted by mail and the results will be announced at the December membership meeting.

Melvin MacDonald, Rec. Sec., Br. 2184

Staff Reports

ECOMP (continued)

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- Initial adjudication of the five basic elements of a case, which include accepting the initial diagnosis and coding the system with the appropriate ICD-10 code.
- Acceptance of a new body part where the link to approved treatment is not clear and unambiguous.
- Acceptance of new psychiatric condition.
- Acceptance of "long Covid."
- Acceptance of aggravations (temporary or permanent).
- Attendant allowance and home health care.

- Approval of any medical/surgical procedure requiring DMA/SECOP/IME.
- Initial response to authorization requests from CNSI.
- Payment of all wage-loss compensation.
- Formal denials (all).

Finally, note that issues involving formal decisions made by OWCP cannot be elevated through the escalations process and must be dealt with through OWCP's formal appeals process. Such decisions include initial denials of cases, formal denials of wage-loss compensation, LWEC determinations, and reductions, terminations and suspensions of benefits.

I will continue this discussion of escalations via ECOMP in the June *Postal Record* and will go over in detail the nuts and bolts of the process.