

## Peer to peer



**Mack I.  
Julion**

**L**ike many of you, my journey to becoming a city letter carrier and eventually a union representative was unintentional. When I left high school, I wanted to be an accountant. But I left college, because it was not a good fit at that time. After a series of jobs to support my family, I became interested in helping others who struggled with addiction to alcohol and other drugs. This led me to go back to school to get a degree in mental health/addiction studies and to get certified by the state of Illinois as an addiction counselor. But the stark reality was that my family

was growing, and a social service job was not enough. Then I hit the lottery—I was offered a career job by the United States Postal Service to become a city letter carrier. So much for that other vocation I loved.

Eventually, I began to really like my job as a mailman. Despite postal management, I appreciated the compensation package, the sense of satisfaction I get from serving our customers and the relationships I developed with my co-workers. When I decided to take on the extra responsibility of being a union representative, I never considered that the things I learned as a counselor would intersect with my responsibilities for the union, but as a steward, it did. You've heard it said that you never know what someone else is going through, but as a steward, we usually do. We get to know more than we want to at times. So, when something traumatic happened within my unit, my skills as a counselor were useful.

**As postal employees, our workplace can make us a tightly knit group. We are *like* family because we usually spend more time at work than with our families. And with any family, what happens to one can affect all. During my tenure as president in Chicago, I was always sensitive to the issues that could affect the members, whether it was the death of a co-worker (on or off duty), the robbery or assault of a letter carrier, and even COVID-19, I wanted to make sure that the needs of the members were being met. During the pandemic, I went station to station whenever a member contracted**

the virus. I wanted to make sure that the carriers were informed, and local management was adhering to their obligations, both legally and contractually. We never shut down our offices because our motto was that we were essential to the *essentials!*

What I discovered in most of these situations is that letter carriers are very good at rallying around each other. So, when President Renfro asked if I would be interested in working with Director of Safety and Health Manny Peralta on a new initiative to create an Emergency Response Team (ERT), I was all in. Brian was aware of my background in addiction and mental health, and thought this would be a perfect fit.

**The concept of an ERT is to address the mental and emotional needs of our members when faced with a traumatic situation. I understood the intent of the United Steelworkers when they put their program together, but how would that work in the Postal Service? We already have an Employee Assistance Program (EAP) and we are certainly not trying to replace that, but it could be augmented with ERT, if done correctly. I thought it could be especially useful in those places that do not have the branch resources to do what they need to in times of trouble.**

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I also knew that there would be no shortage of good people to train for this initiative, because this is something that we as letter carriers already do. Much like a family, we react to the needs of our brothers and sisters. And although we have EAP, it just hits different when we are assisted by our own. When I was counseling, I learned that the success of the 12-step program, which is used in addiction and other self-help situations, relies on the assistance of the participants helping each other. It is said that the “therapeutic value of one alcoholic/addict helping another is without parallel, because an alcoholic or addict can best understand and help another.” That is also true with letter carriers. Peer to peer, us helping each other, is without parallel. We get each other.