

Special route inspections

Since the expiration of the Technology Integrated Alternate Route Evaluation and Adjustment Process (TIAREAP) in the fall of 2024, management has been conducting unilateral route count and inspections under the provisions of Chapter 2, *Handbook M-39, Management of Delivery Services*. They are using every available method to reduce letter carrier hours. All too often they conduct regular route examinations that do not follow the established *Handbook M-39* procedures or the misapplication of the minor route adjustment procedures in *Handbook M-39*, Section 141. The result is often badly adjusted routes that cannot be completed in eight hours. Any such violations of handbook and manual provisions should be grieved; however, there is an additional contractual right afforded to letter carriers that forces managers to live up to the Postal Service's commitment to adjust all letter carrier routes to as near to eight hours as possible.

Handbook M-39, which is incorporated into the *National Agreement* by Article 19, requires that a special route inspection be conducted whenever the regular carrier on a route requests it and qualifies under *Handbook M-39*, Section 271g, which states in pertinent part:

271g. If over any six consecutive week period (when work performance is otherwise satisfactory) a route shows over 30 minutes of overtime or auxiliary assistance on each of three days or more in each week during this period, the regular carrier assigned to such a route shall, upon request, receive a special mail count and inspection within four weeks of the request. The special route inspections provided for in M-39 Section 271g must be conducted in exactly the same manner as regular counts and inspections conducted under the provisions of M-39, Chapter 2.

The provisions of Section 271 refer to the route and not the carrier on the route, despite the fact that the purpose of any such inspection is to adjust the route to the individual carrier. Thus, the fact that the regular carrier on a route may have been absent for any part of the six-week period is irrelevant (see M-01262, M-01263, M-00688).

National Arbitrator Britton held in C-11099 that, if the route otherwise qualifies, management must complete a special route examination within four weeks of the request, even if the inspection must be conducted in June, July or August. Of course, the summer months are usually a low-volume period, but if your route is severely overburdened it may make sense to request a special route examination immediately. After all, if management makes an unrealistic adjustment, they can be forced to do it again—and again, until it is done right.

Managers frequently try to evade these obligations by manufacturing various excuses for not complying with the

special route inspection provisions. One frequent excuse has been that management adjusted the route unilaterally since the request, so there is no longer a problem. Another excuse has been that a carrier only met the criteria for a special inspection because performance was not “satisfactory.” Fortunately, the *Joint Contract Administration Manual* puts these arguments to rest. Its explanation of the M-39 special route inspection provisions (page 41-32) states that:

Once a route qualifies and the incumbent requests a special route inspection, it can not be avoided by unilaterally providing relief, or making an adjustment. Special route inspections are not unit and route reviews. The right to a special route inspection is unaffected by the fact that the office involved may be undergoing, or be scheduled for, a unit and route review.

Performance deficiencies should be addressed in a timely manner. Once the request is made by the incumbent letter carrier, management should not try to avoid conducting the special route inspection by attempting to identify performance deficiencies after-the-fact. Unsatisfactory performance can be a reason for denying a special route inspection if reasonable efforts towards improving performance to a satisfactory level have not been successful and the reasons have been documented and discussed with the carrier during the six week period. Additionally, ‘Unsatisfactory conditions such as “poor case labels,” “poor work methods,” or “no route examiners available,” should not be used as an excuse not to conduct the inspection within the 4-week time frame.’

Handbook M-39, Section 242.122 requires that inspections result in routes being adjusted to “as nearly eight hours daily work as possible.”

Available resources

Special inspections are conducted the same as formal route counts and inspection. Letter carriers should familiarize themselves with Chapter 2 of *Handbook M-39* and Chapter 9 of *Handbook M-41* to gain a better understanding of the route count and inspection process. These handbooks as well as additional resources are available on the NALC website. They include the *2018 NALC Guide to Route Inspections* and the *NALC Route Protection Program* available at nalc.org/workplace-issues/city-delivery/route-adjustments. National-level settlements, Step 4 settlements, and memorandums of understanding can be found in the Materials Reference System (MRS) at nalc.org/mrs. Past “Contract Talk” articles pertaining to these issues are available at nalc.org/workplace-issues/resources/nalc-publications. An overview of route inspections is also available in the Members Only portal at nalc.org. Log in to the Members Only portal and navigate to “Members Menu” > “Shop Steward’s Guide/Forms”>“Route Inspections 2024 Convention Presentation.”