

What happened to Delivery Reliability at the USPS

By Marvin Pirila, retired Postmaster with more than 35 years with the USPS

There have been numerous questions about the delivery operations in Northern Minnesota, so Northland Watch dug into the story. I was a Postmaster with the USPS since 2002 and was a manager full-time since 1993. What was inconceivable in my first 30 years with the USPS was now happening and continuing to happen – the failure of many deliveries by multiple routes across several zip codes on a frequent basis. When I retired at the end of July of 2023, I couldn't see an end to the madness that had ensued. I wanted to leave knowing that I had seen every delivery made every single day and had, outside of snowstorms and weather-related causes. Luckily, I can say my offices never failed, but not without their challenges. For the last year of my career, I was often delivering mail while continuing to do my Postmaster duties.

I couldn't examine the magnitude of this problem as an employee, so I'm doing it now. My first FOIA request was answered by the MN-ND district saying the information was unavailable. I knew they tracked it daily as we either scanned pieces delayed or entered in the Delivery Management System (DMS) as delayed. My 2nd FOIA asked for the same information, but this time naming the programs where it could be found. They delayed it via an extension. This is typically how FOIA requests are answered by the government: either the information doesn't exist, it exists hard to understand form, or is met with intentional delays (such as you must specify exactly where they should look for it, what dates, etc.). The delays are understandable in some cases, where the information request is extensive (and costs are passed back in part to the requester). However, most of it is clear gamesmanship and dodging.

Since December 1, 2022, the USPS has had an unprecedented number of mail delivery delays nationwide. This article will focus on those in the northern third of Minnesota. The data shows that since that time, there were total of 446 impacted routes (many the same ones) and 2097 zip codes (many of the same zip codes undelivered or partially delivered). In all, a total of 90 different offices reported a delivery incident of some kind in the period of December 1, 2022, to January 29, 2024. Other than two bad snowstorms in the winter of 2022 to 2023, the weather wasn't to blame. The number of vacant routes and lack of workers were.

Duluth itself had 299 impacted routes, meaning that many of the 92 routes at the main office, and 37 from Mount Royal, had several routes routinely harmed. The Duluth zip codes, eight in all with routes, were affected 1838 times. The main office has routes for zip codes 55802 (mostly commercial) 55805-55808, 55810-55812. Mount Royal has two zip codes, 55803 and 55804. There were a reported 677 incidents of delayed mail via impacted routes. The records are incomplete, showing 59 dates of incidents but no impacted routes or affected zip codes. Likewise, there are many dates of affected zip codes but no impacted routes and vice versa. The problems peaked in 2022 but continued strong through 2023.

There were many offices that clearly did not report accurately. There were several offices in December of 2022 that repeatedly failed, but only Mount Royal, Baxter, and Duluth reported. The others were covered in daily Telcons but didn't show up on these reports. Esko, for one, had many non-delivery issues that didn't show up in the report. Likewise, Baxter/Brainerd's problems lasted for a long time, with some mail taking several weeks to deliver.

The rules were skirted when containers of packages dropped off by Amazon were not getting the required Arrival at Unit (AAU) scan, per the Manager of Post Office Operations. He likely took his orders from District as everyone else did because no one was allowed to make a local decision. When a package is scanned AAU before the required acceptance time for delivery, it was required to be delivered at the delivery unit the same day. Shipments, such as the large Amazon drop-offs, UPS, and FedEx that came in after the drop off time had to be delivered the next day. The 2022 Christmas season was an absolute disaster in the area, with many deliveries failing to make it to customers by Christmas Eve.

The biggest reason for failure was the same, there were many route vacancies and no extra help where it was needed. The hiring process is flawed and no better than it was 30 years ago. A vacancy requires advance approval by the hiring committee, then posted, and an online test taken. The highest scorer automatically gets the job with no interview. A positive background test leads to nearly two weeks of training wherever and whenever there were enough new hires justify a session. Sometimes, it's local and others, it's in Minneapolis/St. Paul. Generally, about six weeks are needed before you finally get a worker. That's if they don't quit or meet the requirements for the job.

The backup to the regular rural carrier is a rural carrier associate (RCA). In many rural areas, this employee is required to have their own vehicle and be available to work on any given day. The amount of work they'll receive on a regular basis varies greatly from their substitute status on a given route(s). In a case like Meadowlands, the route is evaluated for one Saturday every two weeks, or twice a month. So, you get a guaranteed two days a month and any day the regular carrier takes off (two – three weeks a year). That's the minimum you'll work, but you still need to be readily available and have a vehicle you can drive from the right side.

As service dictates, you may also be forced to serve other routes within a 50-mile area (as a crow would fly). You likely won't get any training in that office and find yourself driving roads you've never driven. On any given day you may be worked up to 12 hours, not to exceed 60 hours in a week. You may also have to work Sundays to deliver Amazon packages that would otherwise make an already difficult Monday worse.

A City Carrier Assistant (CCA) faces the same hiring process, but far more likely to get all the hours they want and more. They, at least, get a USPS vehicle.

The classroom training portion cost up to \$4,000 per person when it was more than 50 miles away because of lodging, per diem, and mileage. It became more common for potential hires to take this training, then quit before putting in a day's work. In at least one case, the employee showed up without having the required vehicle and failed to produce one within two weeks as mandated. She ultimately couldn't do the job and had to be terminated. Others come in, took the opinion that the USPS is government, and they could take whatever time they wanted to get things done. When they are given their probationary reports, they find out that there are repercussions for failing to improve and be productive. Unless the probationary records show a less than favorable performance in their first 90 days, and you have taken the necessary actions to correct it, you have little chance of getting rid of them. Many managers do the easy thing for the moment, give them satisfactory ratings, and then are stuck with them. If you can't see the potential of a new hire within the first 90 days, when their longer-term employment is on the line, you'll never see it.

The real job of driving and delivering mail, in all weather conditions, is often more challenging than many anticipated and they quit. As they already took the job, you cannot simply go to the next highest scorer, but must start over. You just had at least eight weeks wasted and are back at square one. Rural delivery is hard on vehicles as you are constantly stopping and going. This is hard on brakes and transmissions. You may be running on and off pavement on to lower shoulders, causing tire problems. Unless you have a family member that can fix your vehicle affordably, your first big bill might have you rethinking your employment choice. If you go into the ditch with your own vehicle, you pay out of pocket to get it pulled out.

For their troubles, RCAs and CCAs, are paid \$20.38 and \$19.33 an hour, respectively. Neither job guarantees full-time, and any time you accrue within these positions do not count towards retirement.

Under the new PMG, Louis Dejoy, the USPS has degraded service from one-, two-, and three-day service to what is called Ground Advantage, a two to five-day delivery standard. The coveted overnight service was gone, prices dramatically increased, and service day standards extended. Given the extension in delivery time, one expects that their mail will be delivered when it is received at the destination point.