



San Antonio Alamo Area Local Legislative Updates

Letty Alejandro – Legislative Director
LD0195@att.net



Alex Aleman – President, San Antonio Alamo Area Local

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Post Office can't even meet its own lower standards as late mail soars

Amid a significant downsizing of the money-strapped U.S. Postal Service, the number of letters arriving late has jumped by almost 50 percent since the start of the year, and that's measured against the agency's own newly relaxed standards.

The delays have become so serious that the Postal Service's watchdog issued an urgent alert earlier this month recommending that postal officials put all further closures of mail-sorting plants on hold until service stabilizes. "The impacts on customer service and employees have been considerable," Inspector General Dave Williams wrote.

First-class mail has gradually been traveling more slowly since the Postal Service started closing dozens of mail-sorting plants in 2012. But in January, something more drastic happened: To prepare for another round of plant closings, the agency eliminated overnight delivery for local first-class letters that used to arrive the next day. And up to half of mail traveling longer distances was given an extra day to reach its destination. These longer delivery times became the new "service standards" in postal parlance. Mail was considered on time if it took four to five days to arrive instead of three.

But postal officials have struggled this year to meet even these lower standards. The delays have been compounded by two factors, the severe storms last winter and changes to plant operations that started when the new standards took effect. Thousands of postal workers were reassigned and shifts were changed, resulting in a disorganized, inefficient workplace.

Postal Service spokesman David Partenheimer, in a statement, described the changes in January as the "greatest operational changes the Postal Service has ever implemented. "Despite our best efforts to minimize the impacts of the changes, there were some insurmountable challenges that negatively affected service performance, especially when considering the impacts of severe winter weather conditions," he wrote. "We remain totally committed to identifying and correcting errant processes in our operations as early as possible."

But the agency did not agree with the inspector general's recommendation that plant closings stay on hold until service improves across the board. Postmaster General Megan Brennan has temporarily halted the closings; it's unclear when they'll resume.

Members of Congress are now hearing from angry constituents whose mail is taking longer to arrive. The House took a drastic step this spring, passing a measure that requires the Postal Service to return mail delivery standards to 2012 levels. It raised the possibility that some shuttered plants would have to reopen. The Congressional Budget Office said the cost to turn back the clock was so high that it would be unrealistic.

Plant closures have long been a concern for postal unions, who fear a shrinking workforce. Two weeks ago, Brennan met with labor leaders as well as civil rights and consumer groups calling themselves "A Grand Alliance to Save Our Public Postal Service," and slow mail delivery was among the issues on the table. After foundering in three Congresses, legislation to stabilize postal finances is still a possibility, congressional aides say. One of the key issues a bill is likely to address is how to make sure that as the post office cuts costs, it doesn't shortchange its customers, particularly those in rural areas.

Mail still matters to Americans, who sent or received 155 billion pieces in fiscal 2014. "The volumes are still immense," said Steve Hutkins, whose blog Save the Post Office reports on consolidations facing the postal system. "There's a lot of important stuff in the mail. The whole goal of the postal system is to deliver the mail in a speedy, timely way."