

TESTIMONY OF
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BEFORE THE
SENATE COMMITTEE
ON
GOVERNMENTAL AFFAIRS
and the
HOUSE COMMITTEE
ON
GOVERNMENTAL REFORM

U.S. POSTAL SERVICE:
ENSURING THE SAFETY
OF POSTAL EMPLOYEES AND THE MAIL

OCTOBER 30, 2001

Mr. Chairman and Distinguished Members of the Committee. I am Billy Quinn, National President of the National Postal Mail Handlers Union. On behalf of 50,000 union mail handlers employed by the U.S. Postal Service, I appreciate the opportunity to testify about the challenges of safety and security that currently are being faced by the U.S. Postal Service and all postal employees.

The mail handlers we represent are an essential part of the mail processing and distribution network utilized by the Postal Service to move more than 200 billion pieces of mail each year. Mail handlers work in all of the nation's large postal plants, and are responsible for loading and unloading trucks, transporting mail within the facility, preparing the mail for distribution and delivery, operating a host of machinery and automated equipment, and containerizing mail for subsequent delivery. Our members are generally the first and the last employees to handle the mail as it comes to, goes through, and leaves most postal plants.

Our paramount concern is the safety of postal employees, including all mail handlers. To this end, we have been active participants in the Mail Security Task Force that has been established by postal management and includes representatives of all unions and employee associations.

That Task Force is implementing plans to prevent infection by anthrax or other biological agents that may be sent through the mails. Among other issues, the Task Force is addressing the need to close affected facilities until they can be certified as safe for all employees; the distribution of necessary antibiotics to postal employees; the distribution and use of masks and gloves that may be helpful in preventing anthrax infections; the development and delivery of safety training programs; and the development of revised cleaning methods for mail processing equipment. The Task Force also is looking to the future, and is considering a host of issues such as anthrax vaccines and irradiation of the mail.

I must say, however, that the Task Force is having great difficulty keeping up with the news and information cycle that has developed around the anthrax issue. And even when the Task Force has current and accurate information, the timely dissemination of that information to more than 800,000 postal employees in thousands of postal facilities is extremely difficult. This problem is exacerbated by the confusing and often contradictory information that is coming out of Postal Headquarters, the Centers for Disease Control, and state and local health authorities.

I just returned from a meeting of all of our Local Union officers and representatives. After a lengthy discussion of the various safety and medical issues facing mail handlers, our local leadership was fully informed with as much accurate information as possible. Even with this information, however, these representatives remain anxious. Certainly they know that mail handlers must exercise caution while processing the mail. But they are less certain about precisely what to tell their members about the specific steps mail handlers should take to ensure their own safety. On the workroom floor, there is even more anxiety, because members have even less access to accurate information.

The key, therefore, is the timely dissemination of accurate safety and medical information. That should be the focus of the Task Force, and that must be the focus of postal management, the CDC, and state and local health officials. What is needed now is the constant dissemination of accurate – and to the maximum extent possible, consistent – safety and medical information to all postal employees. Mail handlers and other postal employees deserve the best available scientific protection against this bioterrorism. Through science and reason, we can overcome rumor and fear. In that regard, the most important action Congress can take is to appropriate all of the funds necessary for the Postal Service to safely process mail without harm to employees.

It is unfortunate that it takes an incident such as this to make people aware of the hazards of working in postal facilities. Ten years ago, it was the threat of AIDS from needles and blood spills coming from medical waste in poorly constructed packaging in the postal system. With the help of congressional oversight, that problem has largely been eliminated. Yet our members still face

hazardous working conditions. All of the postal unions have written to Congress or testified about the need for protection from dangerous equipment and terrible ergonomic injuries. All of us have had members killed in the line of duty.

We therefore need to take this tragedy and turn it into a positive movement for worker safety. This is a unique moment, when American citizens have again been made aware of the great importance that the Postal Service serves in our nation's communications network. They will rally behind a sustained movement to make the postal workplace safe for its employees and a source of confidence for its customers. To do any less would be to fail in our commitment to the future integrity of the U.S. postal system.

Thank you, and I will be glad to answer any questions you may have.