

**Testimony of
Vincent R. Sombrotto
President of the National Association of Letter Carriers
Before the
United States Senate
Committee on Governmental Affairs
October 30, 2001**

Mr. Chairman, on behalf of the 320,000 members of the National Association of Letter Carriers and myself, I'd like to thank you for holding this important hearing today. I know that you and the members of this committee will understand if I say that I really wish that this hearing was not taking place, but given the current situation we at the the NALC appreciate your concern.

The outpouring of support that we have received over the last week and half has been heartening. To every American, the sight of their letter carrier is a symbol of our national community. It is as familiar as virtually any image of our country. When the perpetrators embarked on this heinous attack they could not possibly have imagined the strength and compassion of the American public.

I know that Congress is keenly aware of the role that the mail plays in our society. As Senator Daschle recently pointed out, "I don't know of anything more important than mail. (Lawmakers) read their mail in order to get a sense of what people are thinking. They read their mail because people have specific concerns.... To be cut off from your mail is really a major impediment to the way any Senate or House office works and functions." In this past Sunday's Washington Post, Helen Dewar reported, "Members say a hand-written letter has a personal quality that is irreplaceable. Its absence, they say, has eroded their own sense of confidence that they are in close contact with the people who elect them, especially the less-affluent and others who do not have computers." Congresswoman Connie Morella stated that, with her Washington office unable to receive mail, constituents were dropping off their letters at her house.

When we are confronted with a challenge of this magnitude that is wholly removed from anything we have seen before, the learning curve is steep. But the Postal Service and all of the employee organizations have been able to disseminate timely information, as it becomes available to us. It is no secret that our union has not always seen eye-to-eye with the USPS, but this unprecedented attack has met with an equally unprecedented level of cooperation.

We have been forced to rethink the way we move our mail. Serving more than 130 million delivery points six days a week requires a massive and expensive infrastructure — an infrastructure that will largely have to be revamped in the coming months. Our members have learned the hard way that they have to look for new threats, and that the country is relying on them for protection. I have visited our members at the Brentwood facility here in Washington and in West Trenton. The New Jersey letter carriers are casing their mail in tents next to the building where they normally work. They have told me that they are proud to carry on with their work as a way of demonstrating their resolve and to send a strong signal to the thugs who perpetrated this crime against our nation.

Every day for the last two weeks I have gathered with the heads of the postal employee organizations and the Postmaster General at postal headquarters to obtain and share the latest developments. We have heard from the CDC, law enforcement and executive branch agencies in our efforts to understand the full magnitude of this situation. In addition to the videotape and other materials that have been distributed from postal headquarters, we at the letter carriers have been working diligently to disseminate information to our members. We have been regularly updating our website with the latest information, our “NALC Bulletin” is distributed and posted in 13,000 postal facilities and we have been communicating with our National Business Agents through our Intranet.

Last week I had the high privilege of meeting in the Oval Office with President Bush, Governor Ridge and Postmaster General Potter. The White House committed \$175 million to deal with the immediate response, such as testing and the distribution of antibiotics, masks and gloves. The Postal Service is also using \$200 million from its own security fund. However, there are still enormous expenses to be met, and the Postal Service will be seeking the \$2.5 billion in funds necessary to obtain and install equipment to sanitize the mail. These are funds that would go towards the purchase of machines through which mail at all processing facilities would pass to be “cleansed” of biological agents. This would prevent the transmission of Anthrax, Smallpox and other infections through the mail. In addition to the actual purchase of the machines, each facility will need to be retrofitted to accommodate the new equipment and to ensure that employees are trained to operate them safely.

It is important to note that the Postal Service is a self-funded entity and does not receive an appropriation. However, remember Congress does owe the Postal Service \$957 million under the Revenue Forgone Reform Act of 1993. Rather than being paid \$29 million a year over 42 years as is written into that act, the Postal Service

needs the full amount now. Even that amount represents only a portion of the revenue lost as a result of the recent events.

This last couple of weeks has exacted a toll on our members and the Postal Service itself. Restoring the confidence of postal employees and the American public is of the utmost importance, not just for our national psyche, but because the Postal Service is an integral part of this country's economic infrastructure. Individuals and businesses rely on the Postal Service to receive and pay bills and securely send original documents. Keeping that system up and running is absolutely essential. Going days without mail exacts an extraordinary price. For example, one utility company in the DC area has reported that they normally receive 30,000 payments through the mail each day. This is just one isolated example of what the mail means to our economy. It is incumbent upon us -- to whatever extent possible -- to make sure that such economic disruption is not visited upon other areas of the country. We also need to keep some level of perspective on the situation. Thus far we have been relatively fortunate that the tragic events of the last few of weeks seem to have been limited to relatively small geographic areas. We also need to be vigilant, because if these evil doers spread their poison elsewhere in the country, the result could be exponentially worse than it has been to this point.

I'd also like to note, Mr. Chairman, that this disaster has further highlighted the shortcomings of the 30-year-old law governing the postal service. Simply put, the Postal Service needs greater flexibility, not just when disaster strikes, but on a daily basis.

Each year the NALC honors our heroes of the year, and letter carriers never cease to amaze me by demonstrating what they are capable of when they are confronted with adverse situations. Now every letter carrier must display that same type of heroism. They are the first line of protection for a large segment of the American population. I know they are up to the task, but they also have to have the tools to take on this new challenge.

Mr. Chairman, I wish to thank you and the members of this committee for taking an interest during this difficult time. Too often the work that we do goes unnoticed. In many ways, that serves as a silent tribute to the members of the NALC. Now that the times have called for a more vocal expression of support, I'm glad that you all have been there. Thank you.

Answers to Questions Submitted to
NALC President Vincent R. Sombrotto

on October 26, 2001

How was the NALC notified of each transmission of anthrax through the U.S. Mail?

Immediately after the first case of anthrax was reported, the NALC began regular meetings with other union leaders and postal officials. Those meetings have continued twice daily for the last two weeks (once a day in person and once by conference call). Once that system was set up, notifications of new cases have been quickly disseminated either in person or by phone call.

When did the NALC learn of these events, and who notified the NALC?

See answer to question 1

Upon learning of these events, what actions did the NALC take to relay the information to its state and local chapters, and how did the state and local chapters relay the information to its members?

The NALC has 15 National Business Agents in different locations around the country. Information has been provided to them via our Intranet, over the phone and by either mailed or faxed written materials. There is a constant flow of the latest information being communicated to them and they in turn have a network to distribute that information to individual letter carriers at postal facilities. Information is also provided through the NALC website and the NALC Bulletin, a newsletter that is posted in 13,000 facilities throughout the country.

How is the NALC coordinating with Postal management and public officials? Coordination with Postal management is addressed in question 1. As for public officials, the NALC has met with dozens of Congressional representatives, including Senators Akaka, Edwards and Kennedy.

What are the NALC's recommendations to its members, to the USPS management, and the public with regard to both current anthrax contamination occurrences and safeguarding against future incidents?

NALC should take precautions to make sure they are protected, including wearing masks and gloves if they feel they are necessary. If they encounter anything suspicious follow the guidelines they have been issued and contact a supervisor immediately

Members of the public have received postcards with tips for identifying and dealing with suspicious mail. They should remain calm and follow those guidelines. The Postal Service needs to take steps to ensure the safety of the mail. That will also require Congressional action to provide the USPS with the resources to buy and install equipment to sanitize the mail.

Assess the Postal Service's responses to each of these events and what actions USPS should take in a future event.

The Postal Service reacted quickly and has set up a good communications network. Keeping such a network in place will be the key to dealing with any future events.

VINCENT R. SOMBROTTO
PRESIDENT
NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF LETTER CARRIERS

Vincent R. Sombrotto is president of the 312,100-member National Association of Letter Carriers, AFL-CIO, which represents city, suburban and small-town letter carriers employed by or retired from the U.S. Postal Service.

He is the senior member of the AFL-CIO Executive Council which oversees operations of the 13 million-member labor federation. He has been an AFL-CIO vice president since 1981 and serves as chair of the AFL-CIO Community Services Committee and is a member of the Committees on Legislation, Political Education, Public Affairs and Balanced Budget.

Mr. Sombrotto is in his 23rd year as NALC president, elected initially in 1978 after serving as president of Branch 36 in New York City, the union's largest local. He was reelected to a new four-year term in September, 1998. In 1970, he was a leader of an eight-day rank-and-file strike that led to reforms included in the Postal Reorganization Act.

He joined the Postal Service as a letter carrier in 1947 after serving with distinction in the U.S. Navy during World War II.

Mr. Sombrotto serves as chairman of the Fund for Assuring an Independent Retirement (FAIR), and the Employee Thrift Advisory Council of the Federal Retirement Thrift Investment Board. He is a member of the Economic Policy Council of the United Nations Association of the USA, the Economic Policy Institute, the Federal Advisory Council on Occupational Safety and Health, and the Board of Directors of the Center for National Policy. He also serves on the boards of the Union Network International (UNI); Muscular Dystrophy Association; American Diabetes Association, the Union Community Fund, and the Union Labor Life Insurance Company.

Mr. Sombrotto was born in New York City on June 15, 1923. He resides in Port Washington, NY.