

CONGRESS REACTS TO CORONAVIRUS

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Since the publication of the last magazine, a lot has changed, and we are all getting used to this new normal. As we face challenges in our personal lives, the NPMHU has to respond to the challenges facing the Postal Service. In the beginning of April, former Postmaster General Megan Brennan reported to members of the House Oversight and Reform Committee that the coronavirus pandemic would be creating substantial losses in mail volume and revenue. She stated the USPS expects to lose \$13 billion this year due to COVID-19, and the pandemic will cause losses of over \$54 billion over the next decade. Without a significant injection of funds to the Postal Service, then-PMG Brennan warned the USPS would be out of cash by the end of the fiscal year, impacting its ability to continue to meet demands of the American people.

Former PMG Brennan gave this report to the House Committee over a week after the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act (P.L. 116-136) became public law. The CARES Act provided \$10 billion in borrowing authority from the Department of Treasury for the Postal Service; however, the bill as adopted also allows for the Treasury Department to impose operational and policy changes as a condition of borrowing. Not only does this money come with strings attached, it is an addition to the Postal Service's debt. Adding insult to injury, President Donald Trump called the Postal Service "a joke" during a April 24 press conference, and stated the Postal Service would not receive any money unless it raises its package rates four times over.

To the benefit of NPMHU members and the Postal Service, the USPS has received positive attention from the media. Most large publications, regardless of political leaning, have brought attention to the plight of the Postal Service, and what it would mean if the agency ran out of money. More and more Americans are realizing that those who live in suburban and rural areas would lose out on services, and not just first-class mail services, but also package delivery that most of us have grown reliant on during the pandemic. In 2019, 1.2 billion prescriptions were delivered to patients through the Postal Service. Approximately 21.3 million Americans do not have reliable internet access, and that situation disproportionately impacts those in rural and tribal areas. People in these areas

are dependent on the Postal Service for basic communication needs. The USPS also receives consistent approval from the American public — according to the Pew Research Center, the Postal Service has a 91 percent approval rating, the most of any federal government agency.

The NPMHU and the other postal unions have pushed members of Congress to recognize the need for public service appropriations and emergency appropriations in order for the Postal Service to financially survive the pandemic. Additionally, the unions requested that borrowing restrictions be taken off of borrowing authorities, as operational and policy changes should be left to the Board of Governors. Because mail handlers and their fellow postal employees are considered essential employees and continue to go to work on a regular basis, the unions requested that employees be provided with hazard pay as they are finding themselves at greater risk of exposure to COVID-19. Understanding the increased health risks Postal Service employees are taking during the pandemic, the Families First Coronavirus Response Act (P.L. 116-127) applied sick leave and family medical leave to the Postal Service, however, it failed to apply the employer reimbursement provisions to USPS; this needs to be remedied.

The Board of Governors made its own request for funding of \$75 billion in appropriations, unrestricted borrowing authority and debt forgiveness, and a grant for capital infrastructure projects. The Republican-led Board's proposal has been gaining bipartisan support within the House. Oversight and Reform Committee Chairwoman Carolyn Maloney (D-NY-12), Subcommittee on Emergency Preparedness Ranking Member Pete King (R-NY-02), Subcommittee on Government Operation Chairman Gerry Connolly (D-VA-11), and Representative Mark Amodei (R-NV-02) created the Postal Preservation Caucus and expressed to House and Senate leadership support for the Board's request. A bipartisan group of Senators did not fully support the Board's request, but did express to Senate leadership the need to authorize "significant emergency appropriations to help the USPS survive this crisis."

Following over a month of working with members of Congress, on Tuesday, May 12, the House of Representatives introduced legislation to further address the coronavirus



pandemic. The Health and Economic Recovery Omnibus Emergency Solutions (HEROES) Act (H.R. 6800) would provide the USPS with \$25 billion in financial relief and remove borrowing stipulations imposed by the CARES Act. Directly impacting NPMHU members, the HEROES Act would grant pandemic premium pay for all postal employees. Acknowledging that these men and women, as essential workers, are placing themselves and their families at a greater risk of contracting the coronavirus, the bill calls for an additional \$13.00 an hour for time worked from January 27, 2020, until 60 days after the pandemic ends. While nothing can fully make up for the physical and mental stress employees are facing, the NPMHU hopes this assistance will provide some ease to members. The HEROES Act was passed in the House on Friday, May 15, and moved to the Senate. Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell (R-KY) and President Trump expressed disapproval of the bill, and will not support it as it stands.

As I am writing this article, in early June, a lot has been happening in a short amount of time. In addition to the HEROES Act, the House introduced legislation providing for \$25 billion in shovel-ready, infrastructure projects for the Postal Service. This will modernize postal facilities and create jobs. As these pieces of legislation move forward or if additional bills are introduced that would impact the Postal Service and NPMHU members, please follow the NPMHU website for any updates. Or if you have any questions about legislation impacting you, please feel free to contact me at kmaddocks@npmhu.org.

The coronavirus is impacting a lot of aspects of our daily routines, but it could also impact Americans lives for years to come. One way this could be seen is through the electoral process. Many of you probably saw the images from the Wisconsin presidential primary election on April 14 or the Georgia primary in early June. Voters were lined up outside of polling locations for hours and were not able to practice safe social distancing. As a result, at least 52 voters in Wisconsin contracted COVID-19. In order to protect the health and well-being of voters, many states have taken measures to allow for vote by mail. Recognizing the longevity of the problem and the impact it will have on the democratic process, the HEROES Act calls for the use of vote by mail for the November 2020 election, and all subsequent elections. States that implemented vote by mail before the pandemic have seen a marked increase in voter participation and reduced election costs. While some suggest that vote by mail shows party favoritism, there is no evidence to prove that contention. To see if your local election board allows for vote by mail, to check your polling location, or to register to vote, please visit www.canivote.org.

This is a difficult time for all of us, but it will eventually pass. I hope everyone and their families are doing as well as can be and staying safe. I am sure we'll see each other soon.

HATCH ACT GUIDANCE ON SOCIAL MEDIA

Two years ago, the U.S. Office of Special Counsel (OSC), which is the federal agency charged with enforcing the Hatch Act applicable to federal or postal employees, issued written guidance concerning the use of social media under the Hatch Act. Given the importance that social media has taken on in electoral campaigns, especially this year's ongoing battles for U.S. President, one-third of the Senate, and the entire House of Representatives, that guidance should be reviewed.

The guidance came with real world examples that may be surprising to the average mail handler, such as the following: "You stay at work during your lunch break and check Facebook on your personal cell phone. A Facebook friend posted a message about an upcoming event supporting a candidate in a partisan race. Even if you are not in a pay status during your lunch break, you may not like or share that post while you are in the workplace."

As the 2020 elections approach, it is imperative that all mail handlers be aware of the limitations imposed by The Hatch Act. Generally stated, employees may not engage in political activity while on duty or in the workplace. Political activity is an activity directed at the success or failure of a political party, candidate in a partisan race, or partisan political group.

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