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Highlights

Objective

Our objective was to evaluate operations and controls over the processing and distribution of Parcel Return Service (PRS) mail in the Los Angeles District.

PRS, introduced in October 2003, is a workshare returns product, with the U.S. Postal Service acting as the mail entry point. It allows a customer to return merchandise using a return mailing label provided by the merchant. Customers can drop off the parcels at any Postal Service facility, give them to a letter carrier or place them in any location identified by the Postal Service for depositing mail, such as a collection box. The Postal Service manually aggregates the parcels by participating partner, performs the required scans, and then tenders them to the partners' pickup agents at select postal facilities.

In fiscal year (FY) 2017, the Los Angeles District processed 773,700 pieces through their PRS program. However, almost 15 percent of those items were not scanned, as required, to event code 17 or 42, known as "tendered to returns agent." We selected the Los Angeles District for review because it missed more scans than other districts nationwide.

What the OIG Found

The Los Angeles District has taken measures to enhance PRS operations and controls, including implementation of added oversight and training through teams of subject matter experts. However, opportunities for improvement remain. Specifically, all 15 Return Delivery Units (RDU) and the Return Sectional Center Facility (RSCF) we visited in the Los Angeles District did not adequately account for or safeguard PRS mail. We noted:

- The 15 RDUs and the RSCF did not consistently follow all required scanning procedures, leading to inconsistent scanning counts across the required scan event codes.
- The 15 RDUs did not have the required written documentation authorizing the Postal Service to tender mail to pickup agents.

- Eleven of 15 (73 percent) RDUs did not maintain the dispatch log correctly, including recording the number of pieces tendered to return agents, obtaining required signatures, or completing the logs on a daily basis.
- Two of 15 (13 percent) RDUs and the RSCF greeted PRS pickup agents upon arrival, but allowed them to have unmonitored or unescorted access to PRS mail.

During our audit, we noted that seven of the 15 RDUs (47 percent) improved their scanning performance during January 2018 when compared to the same period last year. This was a result of recent oversight and training by the Los Angeles District.

These conditions occurred because management did not implement sufficient controls to adequately secure and account for PRS mail. As a result, the Postal Service and PRS partners had an increased risk that theft or loss of PRS mail could occur and not be detected.

What the OIG Recommended

We recommend the Los Angeles District Manager implement stand up talks, conduct training, and increase oversight to:

- Improve Parcel Return Service mail scanning procedures;
- Ensure PRS authorization documentation and dispatch logs are up to date and maintained locally at all RDU locations and the RSCF; and
- Improve control procedures to more adequately secure PRS mail.

Transmittal Letter



June 1, 2018

MEMORANDUM FOR: KENNETH A. SNAVELY

ACTING DISTRICT MANAGER, LOS ANGELES

E-Signed by Janet Sorensen ERIFY authenticity with eSign Deskto

FROM: Janet M. Sorensen

Deputy Assistant Inspector General for Retail, Delivery and Marketings

SUBJECT: Audit Report – Parcel Return Service – Los Angeles District

(Report Number MS-AR-18-004)

This report presents the results of our audit of Parcel Return Service in the Los Angeles District (Project Number 18RG003MS000).

We appreciate the cooperation and courtesies provided by your staff. If you have any questions or need additional information, please contact Joe Wolski, Director, Sales, Marketing and International, or me at 703-248-2100.

Attachment

cc: Postmaster General
Corporate Audit Response Management
Vice President, Pacific Area

Results

Introduction/Objective

This report presents the results of our self-initiated audit of the U.S. Postal Service's Parcel Return Service (PRS) program in the Los Angeles District (Project Number 18RG003MS000). Our objective was to evaluate operations and controls over the processing and distribution of PRS mail in the Los Angeles District.

In fiscal year (FY) 2017, the Los Angeles District processed 773,700 pieces through their PRS program. However, almost 15 percent of those items were not scanned as required to event code 17 or 42, known as "tendered to returns agent." We selected the Los Angeles District for review because it missed more scans than other districts nationwide.

Background

PRS, which was first introduced in October 2003, is a workshare returns product with the Postal Service acting as the mail entry point. It allows a customer to return merchandise using a return mailing label provided by the merchant. Customers can drop off the parcels at any Postal Service facility, give them to a letter carrier or place them in any location identified by the Postal Service for depositing mail, such as a collection box. Postal Service employees at designated PRS facilities manually aggregate the parcels by participating partner, perform the required scans, and then tender the parcels to the partners' pickup agents. There are currently four partners participating in this program. Designated PRS facilities include:

- Return Delivery Units (RDU) a designated post office, station or branch
- Return Sectional Center Facilities (RSCF) a mail processing facility such as a Processing & Distribution Center.
- Return Area Distribution Centers (RADC) a mail processing facility allowed only for customers with a Negotiated Service Agreement (NSA) in place.

PRS revenue during FY 2016 was about \$164 million, and it is expected to grow during FY 2018. Industry studies report that ecommerce sales are projected to rise 15 percent in 2018, and about 30 percent of online purchases are returned by customers. In addition, FY 2018 revenue generated from one partner, which became a PRS participant in 2016,¹ totaled \$21.9 million as of February 28, 2018.

Scanning

Parcel tracking allows PRS users and the Postal Service to monitor the status of

"Industry studies report that ecommerce sales are projected to rise 15 percent in 2018, and about 30 percent of online purchases are returned by customers."

packages. Employees scan parcels as they pass through the postal network and then upload the scan data to the Product Tracking and Reporting (PTR) system. Scans capture the barcode number, the current date and time, the ZIP Code where the parcel was scanned, and the scan event number.

Some scan events may not be applicable to a parcel, but all PRS parcels are required to receive scan event code 3 (Prepaid Acceptance), 16 (Available for Pickup), and either 17 or 42 (Tendered to Returns Agent). Retail employees and carriers accepting PRS parcels are required² to scan the items with event code 3 when they take possession of them. The parcels are then brought to their designated RDU or other designated postal facility where back office³ personnel process the parcels as outlined below.

¹ During November of FY 2017, the Postal Service generated \$3.6 million through its newest PRS partner alone.

² Parcel Return Service - Field Operational Guide for Return Delivery Units, page 44, dated March 2017.

³ Many Post Offices, Stations, and branches provide retail operations as well as carrier operations. The front office, containing the lobby and retail windows, is supported by the back office staff who support retail and carrier operations.

Back Office Personnel at Designated Return Delivery Units

RDU employees scan all PRS parcels and aggregate them by PRS partner. If a particular PRS partner does not retrieve their parcels at the RDU for more than 48 hours, Postal Service employees scan the parcels as "Return to Sender – Not Picked Up" (scan event code 31) and dispatch them to the RSCF in a placarded container.⁴ Otherwise, the back office personnel at delivery units transfer the parcels to the corresponding PRS.

Finding #1: Scanning Procedures

The Los Angeles District has taken measures to enhance PRS operations and controls, including the implementation of added oversight and training through teams of subject matter experts. However, further examination of scanning performance data and observation of RSCF and RDU PRS operations show opportunities for improvement remain. The RSCF and 15 RDUs did not consistently follow required scanning procedures, which led to inconsistent counts across the required scan event codes. Scanning is an integral element of Postal Service's ability to track PRS parcels and reconcile payment data. For example, we observed several scanning deficiencies at the RSCF and four RDUs. Specifically:

- A clerk at the RSCF attempted to dispatch a large container of PRS mail without any scanning made on the parcels (see Figure 1). The mail expeditor clerk, in a hurry to advance the mail flow, attempted to release mail to a PRS pickup agent without allowing the back office employees time to conduct the required scans on each of the items. An operations support specialist who was accompanying our audit team alerted the mail expeditor of this error and did not allow the mail to be released.
- At the RSCF, the tendered to return agent scan did not register on the handheld scanning device prior to the exchange of mail to the return agent. Clerks should ensure scans have been properly documented via electronic handheld scanning devices prior to the release of mail to a return agent.⁵

- One RDU scanned PRS items as tendered to return agent prior to the arrival of PRS pickup agents. Postal Service policy⁶ requires clerks to scan items "Tendered to Returns Agent" once the pickup agent is physically present and not before that time.
- Three RDUs used two handheld scanners to perform "acceptance" and "available for pickup" scans on PRS mail in quick succession. Although the clerk's intentions were to improve efficiency, the limitations of some Postal Service equipment can result in scanning

Figure 1. Container of PRS Mail



Source: U.S. Postal Service Office of Inspector General (OIG) photograph taken January 2018.

errors. Postal Service officials stated the "acceptance" scan and "available for pickup" scan should not occur less than 15 minutes of one another to allow enough time in between scans to be properly recorded in PTR.

These conditions occurred because management did not implement sufficient controls to adequately account for PRS mail. Not all clerks knew how to correctly conduct the PRS mail process at the time of our visit.

During our audit, the Los Angeles District management provided oversight and training to eight of the 15 RDUs we visited, which resulted in scanning improvements in all but one unit. Although scanning data indicates deficiencies remain across the 15 RDUs we visited, five of these units (Westchester, Rancho Parch, Mar Vista, Culver City, and Santa Monica) had improved their scanning performance in the percent of total items scanned "Tendered to Returns Agent" by more than 25 percent during January 2018 when compared to the same period last year (SPLY) (see Table 1).

⁴ The RDC-09 placard is a label used to transport mail from one Postal Service facility to another because a particular PRS partner did not retrieve the mail within the required 48 hour timeframe.

⁵ Parcel Return Service - Field Operational Guide for Return Delivery Units, pages 9 and 14, March 2017.

⁶ Parcel Return Service - Field Operational Guide for Return Delivery Units, page 23, March 2017.

Table 1. Percentage Improvement When Comparing January 2018 to SPLY

Unit Name	Received Training in December 2017 or January 2018	Percentage Improvement in Total Pieces Tendered to Return Agent From SPLY	
Westchester	Yes	70%	
Rancho Park	Yes	65%	
Mar Vista	Yes	58%	
Eagle Rock	No	43%	
Culver City	Yes	35%	
Santa Monica	Yes	28%	
El Segundo	No	10%	
West Adams	Yes	6%	
Preuss	No	6%	
Foy	No	4%	
Pacific Palisades	No	1%	
Venice	Yes	1%	
Bicentennial	Yes	0%	
Oakwood	No	-1%	
Los Feliz	No	-4%	

Source: OIG analysis.

Incomplete scanning could prevent the Postal Service from reconciling the number of PRS mailpieces tendered to return agents and identifying the location of the package in the event of a discrepancy. Furthermore, management will not be able to adequately monitor or improve PRS performance, and PRS mail users

Recommendation #1

We recommend the Acting Los Angeles District Manager implement recurring stand up talks, follow up training, and increased oversight to improve Parcel Return Service mail scanning procedures.

Finding #2: Parcel Return Service Authorization and Dispatch Logs

Fifteen RDUs did not have the required written documentation authorizing the Postal Service to tender mail to the pickup agents. Postal Service policy⁷ requires back office/dispatch operation employees to ensure the Standing Delivery Order is on file and contains the signature of the pickup agent. The PRS partner should provide a completed Standing Delivery Order and authorization letter before pickups begin. If these forms are not on file at the time of the pickup, the pickup is not authorized and there should not be any transfer of mail.

These conditions occurred because clerks and local RDU management were not aware of the requirements to maintain local copies of authorization documents, prior to the implementing PRS at the unit. According to a station manager at one RDU, a return agent picked up PRS mail after one of the postal partners revoked his authority.

In addition, 11 RDUs did not properly maintain PRS dispatch logs. See Figure 2 for an example of an incomplete PRS dispatch log. PRS dispatch logs should be completed, daily. Postal Service policy⁸ requires clerks at designated pickup points, to sign and have the return agent sign

"Fifteen RDUs
did not have the
required written
documentation
authorizing the
Postal Service to
tender mail to the
pickup agents."

will not be able to monitor the status of their packages without increased oversight and recurring training.

⁷ Parcel Return Service - Field Operational Guide for Return Delivery Units, page 18, March 2017.

⁸ Parcel Return Service – Field Operational Guide for Return Delivery Units, page 23, March 2017.

the local PRS dispatch logbook, daily, to document agreement on the number of items tendered. In particular:

Figure 2. Incomplete PRS Dispatch Log



Source: OIG photograph taken January 2018.

- Nine RDUs did not complete the PRS dispatch log each day.
- Two RDUs did not consistently record the number of PRS items tendered to each pickup agent (see examples in Figures 3 and 4).
- Five RDUs did not consistently have PRS pickup agents sign the PRS dispatch logbook (see examples in Figures 3 and 4).

Figure 3. Missing Signatures and Items Tendered



Source: OIG photograph taken January 2018.

- One RDU signed the PRS dispatch log on behalf of the PRS pickup agent the night before the pickup agent's arrival.
- Ten RDUs did not retain their PRS dispatch logs for at least six months.

RDUs did not properly maintain PRS dispatch logs because clerks were not aware this needed to be completed on a daily basis. At some RDU locations, we observed clerks

Figure 4. Missing Signatures and Items Tendered



Source: OIG photograph taken January 2018.

allow PRS pickup agents to depart with their PRS mail without completing the logbook.

Without PRS authorization forms and properly maintaining PRS dispatch logs, the Postal Service has an increased risk of theft or loss of mail. Furthermore, the Postal Service will not be able to document the number of parcels tendered to the return agent, in the event of discrepancies.

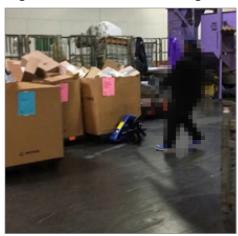
Recommendation #2

We recommend the Acting Los Angeles District Manager, ensure Parcel Return Service authorization documentation and dispatch logs are up to date and maintained locally at all Return Delivery Unit locations and the Return Sectional Center Facilities.

Finding #3: Security over Parcel Return Service Mail

Two out of 15 RDUs and the RSCF allowed PRS pickup agents to have unmonitored or unescorted access to PRS mail. In all three instances a Postal Service employee greeted the pickup agent when they arrived. However, the pickup agent proceeded unescorted inside the facility while the employee tended to other matters (see Figures 5 - 6 for the RSCF). Postal Service policy⁹ states that access to all workroom and restricted areas is limited to authorized onduty Postal Service employees and authorized contractors. All other individuals are restricted unless they have legitimate business on the floor and are properly escorted. Furthermore, the PRS RDU Guidebook states that clerks should not allow agents or partners to enter the building and take PRS shipments before verifying proper driver identification. Postal Service escorts help to ensure that Postal Service property and customer mail is not damaged, stolen, or mistakenly taken. Escorts can also protect individuals from potential safety hazards such as areas undergoing repairs, wet floors, etc.

Figures 5 – 6. Unescorted Agent Picking up PRS Mail at the RSCF





Source: OIG photograph taken January 2018.

Unescorted Non-USPS Employee Click the image above to watch the vises.

If the video will not play, please try a different browser.

⁹ Administrative Support Manual, Section 273.121.

¹⁰ Parcel Return Service - Field Operational Guide for Return Delivery Units, page 14, March 2017.

These conditions occurred because Postal Service employees were not aware pickup agents should be properly escorted during their entire time at the facility. Although, clerks may see the contracted pickup agents daily, Postal Service employees should ensure the security of PRS mail by monitoring pickup agents retrieve only the mail designated for them. Lack of security over PRS mail will increase risk of theft or loss of mail.

At one RDU the security gate to the loading dock area was held open for several hours with the use of a paper placard taped over the sensor (see Figures 7 and 8). A driver explained the gate is left open to make it easier for some Postal Service employees to bring mail in and out from their vehicle. However, mail was left unattended at the dock while the gate was open. Allowing this gate to remain open without direct supervision leaves the unit susceptible to security weaknesses (see Figure 9).

Figures 7 and 8. Security Gate Held Open by Paper Over the Sensor





Source: OIG photograph taken January 2018.

Figure 9. Unattended Mail Secured by Fence and Gate



Source: OIG photograph taken January 2018.

Recommendation #3

We recommend the Acting Los Angeles District Manager implement recurring stand-up talks, follow-up training, and increased oversight to improve control procedures to more adequately secure Parcel Return Service mail.

Management's Comments

Management agreed with the findings and recommendations.

Regarding recommendation 1, management stated the Los Angeles District will implement quarterly PRS stand-up talks with all Los Angeles District employees, track compliance on their district website, and conduct follow-up training and oversight weekly at three vital units selected based on scanning performance. The process will be ongoing, with a target implemented date of May 31, 2018.

Regarding recommendation 2, management stated the RSCF will conduct weekly stand-up talks, train new dock employees and provide refresher training as needed. The RSCF will ensure there is a meet and greet with the PRS agent, provide increased oversight to ensure expeditors and PRS employees follow instructions and proper protocol related to pickup agents, and require

dock personnel to immediately report all suspicious activities and unauthorized personnel to local management. In subsequent correspondence, the Los Angeles District confirmed they agreed with recommendation 2, and that stand-up talks and training will include required PRS documentation and dispatch logs. The target implementation date is May 31, 2018.

Regarding recommendation 3, management stated the Los Angeles District will reinforce PRS control procedures. Facility management will hold and certify they held quarterly PRS stand-up talks with all employees. Additionally, the district will conduct weekly onsite follow-up training and oversight at three vital RDU units selected based on scanning performance. These reviews will validate local security procedures to ensure PRS mail is secure and accounted for. The process will be ongoing, with a target implementation date of May 31, 2018.

See Appendix C for management's comments in their entirety.

Evaluation of Management's Comments

The OIG considers management's comments responsive to the findings and recommendations in the report.

All recommendations require OIG concurrence before closure. Consequently, the OIG requests written confirmation when corrective actions are completed. All recommendations should not be closed in the Postal Service's follow-up tracking system until the OIG provides written confirmation that the recommendations can be closed.

Appendices

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Appendix A: Additional Information

Scope and Methodology

The scope of the project is PRS in the Los Angeles District, during FYs 2017 and 2018. To accomplish our objectives, we judgmentally selected 15 RDUs in the Los Angeles District based on PRS scanning performance data and the RSCF. In addition we:

- Reviewed Postal Service PRS policies, procedures, and applicable responsibilities.
- Observed PRS operations at 15 RDUs and one RSCF in the Los Angeles District. We judgmentally selected the 15 RDUs based on our evaluation of FY 2018 PRS scanning data, office size and geographic considerations. We excluded offices falling under a specific threshold of PRS mail volume.
- At each unit, obtained, reviewed, and analyzed operational practices such as PRS mail security and supervision, scanning, and pickup agent processes.
- Interviewed appropriate retail operations managers at the unit and district levels to obtain an in-depth overview of Los Angeles District's PRS operations.
- Interviewed Postmasters and Customer Service supervisors at the units to determine if PRS operations are being completed according to Postal Service policies and procedures.
- Interviewed Postal Service managers and headquarters officials on PRS revenue, security controls, and scanning procedures.

- Identified the impact of package scan accuracy in relation to the effectiveness of the PRS program.
- Identified opportunities to improve security controls throughout the PRS program in order to minimize the occurrence of losses due to theft or human errors.

We conducted this performance audit from December through June 2018, in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards and included such tests of internal controls as we considered necessary under the circumstances. Those standards require that we plan and perform the audit to obtain sufficient, appropriate evidence to provide a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objective. We believe that the evidence obtained provides a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objective. We discussed our observations and conclusions with management on April 30, 2018, and included their comments where appropriate.

We assessed the reliability of PRS scanning performance data by reviewing PRS scanning requirements and observing scanning practices at sites we visited. We determined that the data were sufficiently reliable for the purposes of this report.

Prior Audit Coverage

The OIG did not identify any prior audits or reviews related to the objective of this audit issued within the last five years.

Appendix B: Summary of Sites Visited

We judgmentally selected 15 RDUs in the Los Angeles District based on PRS scanning performance data. Table 2 shows issues we identified at each unit.

Table 2: List of Sites Visited with Issues Identified

Unit Name	Unsupervised PRS Agents	No Authorization Documentation	Incomplete PRS Dispatch Logs	Did Not Follow Scanning Procedures
Oakwood		X		X
West Adams	X	X		X
Los Feliz		X	X	X
Preuss		X		X
Eagle Rock	X	X	X	X
Westchester		X	X	X
Bicentennial		X		X
Foy		X	X	X
Rancho Park		X	X	X
Mar Vista		X	X	X
Culver City		X	X	X
El Segundo		X	X	X
Pacific Palisades		X	X	X
Venice		X	X	X
Santa Monica		X	X	X
Los Angeles RSCF	X			X

Source: OIG analysis.

Appendix C: Management's Comments



May 18, 2018

Lori Lau Dillard Director, Audit Operations

SUBJECT: Parcel Return Service - Los Angeles District (MS-AR-18-DRAFT)

Management agrees that the Los Angeles District has taken measures to enhance PRS operations and controls, including the implementation of added oversight and training through teams of subject matter experts. However, opportunities for improvement remain. These opportunities include:

- All 15 RDUs and the RSCF did not consistently follow all required scanning procedures, leading to inconsistent scanning counts across the required scan event codes.
- All 15 RDUs did not have the required written documentation authorizing the Postal Service to tender mail to pick up agents.
- Eleven out of 15 (73 percent) RDUs did not maintain the dispatch log correctly, including recording the number of pieces tendered to return agents, obtaining required signatures, or completing the logs on a daily basis.
- Two out of 15 (13 percent) RDUs and the RSCF greeted PRS pickup agents upon arrival, but allowed them to have unmonitored or unescorted access to PRS mail.

Recommendation 1:

We recommend the Los Angeles District Manager, implement recurring stand up talks, follow up training, and increased oversight to improve Parcel Return Service mail scanning procedures.

Management Response/Action Plan:

Management agrees with the recommendation. The Los Angeles District will implement quarterly PRS standups with all Los Angeles District employees. Compliance to the PRS Standup will be web based on our district website. Additionally, the operations support department will be conducting onsite follow up training and oversight at 3 vital units on a weekly basis. The vital units will be

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chosen in accordance to their scanning performance. The process will be ongoing as we transition into both new quarters and new weeks of the fiscal year.

Target Implementation Date:

May 31st 2018

Responsible Official:

Christian Pulido, Manager Delivery and Customer Service Programs Support

Recommendation 2:

We recommend the Los Angeles District Manager, ensure PRS authorization documentation and dispatch logs are up to date and maintained locally at all RDU locations and the RSCF.

Management Response/Action Plan:

The RSCF will be conducting stand-talks with dock personnel during their weekly huddles in order to drive employee engagement. They will training new dock personnel and provide refresher training as needed.

The RSCF will ensure there is a meet and greet with the PRS Agent. Management will monitor and increase supervision oversight on Expeditors and PRS employees to follow instruction and proper protocol diligently while attending to the arrival of a PRS agent during their scheduled pickup window.

Dock personnel will be required to report all suspicious activities involving mail and unauthorized personnel on Postal premise immediately and appropriately to the tour

Management MDO and SDO in charge.

Target Implementation Date:

May 31st 2018

Responsible Official:

 $\mbox{RDU}\mbox{'s}-\mbox{Christian}$ Pulido, Manager Delivery and Customer Service Programs Support

RSCF - Gretchen Alspach, LAPDC Sr. Lead MDO Jordan Tolson, MIPS Holly Tran, OSS PRS Coordinator

Recommendation 3:

We recommend the Los Angeles District Manager, implement recurring stand up talks, follow up training, and increased oversight to improve control procedures to more adequately secure PRS mail.

Management Response/Action Plan:

Page 2 of 3

Management agrees with the recommendation. The Los Angeles District will implement quarterly PRS standups with all Los Angeles District employees in order to continue reinforcing the control procedures on how to handle our PRS product appropriately. Part of the certification process to ensure these standups occur will be through a survey on our Los Angeles District webpage where each facility head must certify that they have completed the standup talk with all of their employees in order to monitor for completion. Additionally, the operations support department will be conducting onsite follow up training and oversight at 3 vital RDU units on a weekly basis. These reviews will include validating the local unit's security procedures in order to ensure our PRS product is secure and accounted for. The vital units will be chosen in accordance to their scanning performance. The process will be ongoing as we transition into both new quarters and new weeks of the fiscal year.

Target Implementation Date:

May 31, 2018

Responsible Official:

Christian Pulido, Manager Delivery and Customer Service Programs Support

Ken A. Snavely
District Manager

cc: Janet M. Sorensen

Deputy Assistant Inspector General for Retail, Delivery and Marketing Manager, Corporate Audit Response Management

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1735 North Lynn Street Arlington, VA 22209-2020 (703) 248-2100