



# FACT SHEET

## Review of Facility Conditions at the Groton, Connecticut, Main Post Office

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### Introduction

This fact sheet presents the results of our audit of employee working conditions at the Groton, Connecticut, Main Post Office. We conducted this review after receiving allegations from five employees who believed the post office was unsafe and that workers were at risk of injury and illness. This fact sheet contains the background; audit objective, scope, and methodology; prior audit coverage; other safety and health conditions found that were not discussed in the accompanying video report; management's corrective actions; our recommendations; management's comments; and our evaluation of their comments.

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### Background

The Groton, Connecticut, Main Post Office was constructed in 1969, and the Postal Service leased it in 1970. The post office is a one-story masonry building with approximately 19,882 square feet primarily consisting of interior space for Postal Service operations and customer services. Beginning in 1993, Postal Service documents outlined serious concerns about the deteriorating condition of the flat roof and subsequent water damage to the interior of the post office.

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### Objective, Scope, and Methodology

The objective of our audit was to determine the validity of allegations concerning unsafe working conditions at the Groton, Connecticut, Main Post Office. Specifically, employees told us they were at risk from the following conditions:

- Leaking roof water.
- Electrical shock and fire hazards.
- Damaged ceiling tiles.
- Poor indoor air quality.

To verify the conditions at the Groton, Connecticut, Main Post Office, we conducted two site visits on November 7 and 15, 2002, and we took photographs and video of potential safety and health conditions that were present at that time. In addition, the United States Army Corps of Engineers, experts in the field of architecture and industrial hygiene, and an environmental testing company assisted us in this review.

We reviewed applicable regulations, policies, and procedures, and examined the Groton, Connecticut, Main Post Office's safety and health inspection reports, asbestos and lead-based paint survey, and other documents including correspondence between Postal Service officials dated from calendar years 1993 to 2002. We also interviewed Postal Service management and employees, and state and local officials.

This audit was conducted from November 2002 through June 2003, in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards, and included such tests of internal controls, as were considered necessary under the circumstances. We discussed our conclusions and observations with appropriate management officials and included their comments, where appropriate.

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**Prior Audit Coverage**

We did not identify any prior audits or reviews related to the objective of this audit at this location.

## AUDIT RESULTS

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### Unsafe Working Conditions

During site visits conducted on November 7 and 15, 2002, we found the following potentially unsafe working conditions at the post office:

1. Evidence of leaking roof water.
2. Potential electrical shock and fire hazards.
3. Damaged ceiling tiles.
4. Evidence of questionable bacteria.
5. Blocked access to electrical service area.
6. Mold in delivery vehicles.
7. Improper maintenance of asbestos floor tiles.
8. Chemicals stored improperly and lacking documentation.

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### Evidence of Leaking Roof Water

We found the following problems with the roof at the time of our visit:

- Water had leaked on at least ten occasions from the flat roof into many areas of the post office including walls, ceilings, floors, and electrical fixtures.
- Standing water of up to 2 inches covered approximately 3,000 square feet of the 19,000 square foot roof.

These conditions primarily resulted from a deteriorated flat roof that was not draining properly. According to at least 11 Postal Service and external documents, the roof had sporadically leaked for at least 10 years. Management acknowledged that 15 roof repairs were made in the last 10 years. We found repairs made from June 1996 to November 2002, temporarily corrected the specific leaking problems; however, the repairs altered the roof's slope preventing water from reaching the drains and caused standing water. Management told us that when leaks occurred, repairs were made in accordance with Postal Service policy.

Additionally, the Postal Service did not implement three previous recommendations to replace the roof. For example, a 1998 study contracted by the Postal Service categorized the deteriorated condition of the roof as one that constituted a hazard to life or health, and a hazard to property

or continuity of Postal Service operations. In addition, the report stated, "The existing built-up roof and membrane reroofing has deteriorated to the point where periodic maintenance is not sufficient to maintain its integrity." In December 2002, the firm that conducted the 1998 study stated it was hard to determine how long the roof would continue to perform; however, when it became an immediate hazard, "it could be too late for both occupants and postal operations."

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Potential Electrical  
Shock and Fire Hazards

The water leaks created potential electrical shock and fire hazards in many places of the post office. For example, we saw:

- Approximately four lights switched off to further reduce the risk of electrical hazard due to the leaking water.
- An 8' x 10' tarp used to collect and direct leaking water into buckets on the floor.

These potential hazards have existed since at least November 1994, and on two occasions, in November 1994 and December 2000, the fire department was called to the post office because water had leaked from the roof accumulating on the workroom floor and to check a smoking ballast.

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Damaged Ceiling Tiles

We observed about 5 missing and 38 stained or damaged ceiling tiles throughout the post office. Management told us that 93 of the 1,291 tiles in the workroom were replaced sometime prior to our visits. Architectural studies conducted in 1998 and 2002 advised the Postal Service to replace the water damaged ceiling tiles because of their weakened state. We found that the stained tiles resulted from water leakage and on three occasions, waterlogged tiles had fallen and one of them had struck, but did not injure, an employee.

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Evidence of  
Questionable Bacteria

The allegation of poor indoor air quality was not substantiated by an independent testing company that found the indoor air quality within federal standards. However, an additional test conducted by the company, found the presence of questionable bacteria in stagnant water closely located to a fresh air intake duct on the roof. Because of the unknown risks associated with the bacteria, we agree the company's

recommendation to remove the stagnant water as soon as possible, and in the interim, treat it with chlorine would prevent any future growth.

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Management's  
Knowledge of the  
Deteriorated Roof

Postal Service officials were aware of the deteriorating conditions at this post office. For example, in 1998, the District Administrative Services Office paid over \$4,000 for an independent architectural inspection to use during an upcoming lease renewal. However, facilities service office officials renewed the 10-year lease on May 20, 1998, 1 day prior to the start of the firm's inspection and 2 weeks before the firm issued its final report recommending replacement of the roof.

We found the deteriorated conditions at the post office occurred because of insufficient communications between Groton, Connecticut, Main Post Office, district, and facility service office management. Postal Service officials said that recently revised procedures should prevent a similar occurrence in the future.

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<b>Other Safety and Health Conditions</b>	During our November 2002 site visits, we also observed the following safety and health conditions that were not in the original allegations.
Blocked Access to Electrical Service Area	We saw large metal doorframes blocking access to electrical circuit breakers and main shutoff switches in the electrical service area. This prevented immediate access to these systems in the event of an electrical emergency.
Mold in Delivery Vehicles	We found mold in numerous delivery vehicles located at the post office. According to an independent test, adverse health conditions for drivers may have existed because of the allergenic, infectious, and toxic effect the mold may have on some individuals. The Postal Service had not cleaned the delivery vehicles for 7 months despite regulations that required monthly vehicle cleaning. Postal Service officials told us the contractor responsible for this service had been ill.
Improper Maintenance of Asbestos Floor Tiles	The post office did not always use the proper floor buffer pads to maintain its asbestos floor tiles. Some buffer pads used were too abrasive and may have potentially caused asbestos fibers to become airborne. In addition, the floor buffer was not adequately marked and we could not determine if it met federal standards. We also found that post office management was not performing required periodic asbestos inspections. These inspections may have identified the deficiencies we found.
Chemicals Improperly Stored and Lacking Documentation	A storage cabinet containing hazardous and flammable chemicals was closely located to an electrical panel. This created an environment where sparks from the panel could have ignited the chemicals.
	In addition, the post office was not maintaining documentation for hazardous chemicals, such as a current inventory and supporting Material Safety Data Sheets, as required by federal standards. As a result, employees did not have the information needed to utilize and store the chemicals in a safe manner or provide the appropriate first aid during an emergency.

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**Corrective Actions  
Taken**

Postal Service management took the following corrective actions:

- Removed the metal doorframes.
- Replaced the existing buffer.
- Relocated the chemical cabinet.

In addition, Postal Service management told us they would:

- Immediately clean the vehicles and ensure they were cleaned on a regular basis.
- Use the appropriate buffer pads for floor maintenance.
- Prepare the proper documents for chemical storage.

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**Recommendations**

We recommend the Northeast Area Operations and vice president, Facilities:

1. Inspect as soon as possible the roof on the Groton, Connecticut, Main Post Office for the purpose of determining whether the roof requires either substantial improvement or replacement.
2. Assess the adequacy of the existing electrical system and make improvements where necessary.
3. Replace all stained, damaged, or missing ceiling tiles.
4. Establish management controls to ensure repair and safety needs are identified and resolved in a timely manner.

Finally, we recommend the Connecticut District manager, instruct the Groton postmaster to establish controls to ensure:

5. Delivery vehicles are cleaned on a monthly basis in accordance with Postal Service Policy.

6. Periodic asbestos inspections are performed as required by the Environmental Protection Agency and Postal Service policies.
7. Full compliance with Occupational Safety and Health Administration standards and Postal Service policies regarding the maintenance of building materials containing asbestos.

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**Management's  
Comments**

Management agreed with our recommendations, however, they did not agree that the video and language used in the fact sheet reflected the true conditions at the Groton Main Post Office. Management also stated the decision to renew the lease on this facility was a proper business decision. Management further stated that they believed the video was not an appropriate vehicle for this audit.

Management acknowledged, however, that the building had maintenance issues typical of an older facility operating with a below-market lease. However, they said the maintenance issues were being addressed and the facility provided safe conditions for Postal Service employees and customers. Specifically, management said the roof has been inspected and management will meet with the lessor in June to negotiate an agreement to have the roof replaced. Management also stated that an electrical engineer would review the electrical system in June and will submit a report reflecting any actions necessary. They stated that a separate project was being considered to improve the energy efficiency of the lighting. Management also told us that many of the ceiling tiles had been replaced and the replacement of the remaining tiles would occur when the roof has been replaced. In addition, management stated the ongoing consolidation of the facility-related responsibilities of the former district administrative services offices into the Northeast Facilities Service Office had streamlined the process for identification of needed repairs. Finally, management stated that the district manager instructed the postmaster of Groton to establish controls to ensure delivery vehicles are cleaned on a monthly basis, periodic asbestos inspections are performed as required, and that full compliance with Occupational Safety and Health

Administration standards and Postal Service policies regarding the maintenance of building materials containing asbestos would occur.

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**Evaluation of  
Management's  
Comments**

Management's actions taken or planned should correct the issues identified in this report.

We disagree however that the video and language used in the fact sheet did not reflect the true conditions at the Groton Main Post Office. In addition, we believe a video was the best medium to provide a clear understanding of the issues and/or physical conditions and that the characterization of the video and fact sheet accurately reflect the conditions at the facility. Also, while we believe the decision to renew the lease might have been proper from an economical standpoint; the safety of employees and customers should be paramount when making all business decisions.

## APPENDIX. MANAGEMENT'S COMMENTS

RUDY UMSCHIED  
VICE PRESIDENT, FACILITIES



May 29, 2003

MARY W. DEMORY  
ASSISTANT INSPECTOR GENERAL FOR CORE OPERATIONS

SUBJECT: Draft Audit Video Report—Review of Facility Conditions at the Groton, Connecticut,  
Main Post Office (Report Number LH-AR-03-DRAFT)

This responds to the draft audit video and fact sheet transmitted to my office on May 22.

We continue to believe that a) the video is not an appropriate vehicle for such an audit; b) both the video and the language used in the fact sheet do not reflect the true conditions at the Groton Main Post Office; and c) the decision to renew the lease on this facility was a proper business decision. The building does have maintenance issues typical of an older facility operating with a below-market lease. However, these maintenance issues are being addressed; and the facility provides safe conditions for our employees and our customers.

The following are management's comments regarding the specific recommendations:

We recommend the Northeast Area Operations and Facilities Vice Presidents:

1. Inspect as soon as possible the roof on the Groton, Connecticut, Main Post Office for the purpose of determining whether the roof requires either substantial improvement or replacement.

Management Response: We agree with this recommendation. The Manager, Northeast Facilities Service Office, has inspected the roof and will meet the lessor in June to negotiate an agreement to have the roof replaced.

2. Assess the adequacy of the existing electrical system and make improvements where necessary.

Management Response: We agree with this recommendation. An electrical engineer will review the system in June and will submit a report reflecting any actions necessary. A separate project is being considered to improve the energy efficiency of the lighting.

3. Replace all stained, damaged, or missing ceiling tiles.

Management Response: We agree with this recommendation. Many tiles have been replaced. However, replacement of remaining tiles will not occur until the roof replacement has occurred.

4. Establish management controls to ensure repair and safety needs are identified and resolved in a timely manner.

Management Response: We agree with this recommendation. The ongoing consolidation of the facility-related responsibilities of the former District Administrative

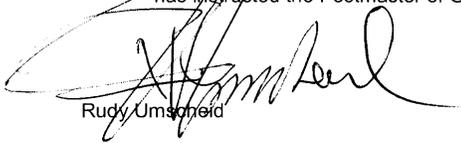
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Services Offices into the Northeast Facilities Service Office has streamlined the process for identification of needed repairs by postmasters and station and branch managers, as well as the response by the Facilities Service Office. As part of this program, all repairs are tracked to ensure timely response and follow-up actions.

We recommend the Connecticut District Manager instruct the Groton postmaster to establish controls to ensure:

5. Delivery vehicles are cleaned on a monthly basis in accordance with Postal Service policy.
6. Periodic asbestos inspections are performed as required by the Environmental Protection Agency and Postal Service policies.
7. Full compliance with Occupational Safety and Health Administration standards and Postal Service policies regarding the maintenance of building materials containing asbestos.

Management Response: We agree with these recommendations. The District Manager has instructed the Postmaster of Groton to ensure compliance with the above policies.



Rudy Umscheid

cc: Mr. Nolan  
Mr. Rapp  
Mr. Steele  
Mr. Galligan  
Mr. Russell