

February 29, 2000

DAVID L. SOLOMON
VICE PRESIDENT, NEW YORK METRO AREA
OPERATIONS

SUBJECT: Allegations of a Hostile Work Environment in a
New York Metro Area Post Office
(Report Number LM-LA-00-002)

This is our advisory report on allegations of a hostile work environment at the Arecibo, Puerto Rico, Post Office.

Representative John M. McHugh, Chairman of the Subcommittee on the Postal Service, requested that the Office of Inspector General (OIG) conduct this review (Project Number 00ER037LM000). We were asked to review several concerns involving a potential for violence in the workplace, including an incident where an employee allegedly threatened to strike an acting supervisor, and another incident in which the postmaster allegedly physically struck an employee and verbally abused other employees.

Results in Brief

We found evidence that a hostile work environment existed, but that postal management has improved the environment over the last two years.

The Postal Inspection Service investigated the incident concerning the employee who, in 1997 allegedly threatened the supervisor and found that a threat had indeed been made. Postal management suspended the employee and he was later moved to another post office.

In the case of the postmaster, management found that in 1997 the postmaster struck an employee, pushed an employee, and created a hostile work environment for other employees. As a result, postal management disciplined the postmaster and a management consultant met with the postmaster and employees on several occasions in an effort to improve workplace conditions.

We believe that district management took appropriate action to resolve the issues and was successful in improving the workplace climate. Management is continuing to work on unresolved issues at the post office, however there no longer appears to be a hostile work environment in Arecibo, as evidenced in a climate survey, which was conducted in December 1999. We discussed the contents of this report with management, who elected not to provide written comments.

**Objectives, Scope,
and Methodology**

In letters dated January 12, 1998, February 20, 1998, July 22, 1998, and April 16, 1999, Representative John M. McHugh requested that the OIG conduct an inquiry into allegations made by Postal Service employees, as well as by the daughter of an employee, that a hostile work environment existed at the Arecibo Post Office.

The OIG normally does not review individual labor-management disputes, particularly when other formal avenues of resolution exist, including contractual grievance-arbitration procedures and the Equal Employment Opportunity process. However, we do undertake such reviews when the allegations pertain to violence in the workplace.

Our objectives were to determine whether: (1) an employee threatened a supervisor; (2) the postmaster struck an employee and verbally abused other employees; and (3) district management responded to the incidents in accordance with established policies and procedures.

We reviewed documents provided by Representative McHugh, by the area manager of Human Resources, the Postal Inspection Service, and by an outside management consultant who was brought in to examine the post office's workplace climate. The documents provided to us included the consultant's notes and climate assessments, the Inspection Service's investigative report on the alleged verbal threat to a supervisor, and an arbitrator's decision in that case. In addition, we interviewed the area manager of Human Resources.

We also reviewed the Postal Service Joint Statement on Violence and Behavior in the Workplace and the Threat Assessment Team Guide, Publication 108.

This review was conducted from March 1999 through February 2000, in accordance with the President's Council on Integrity and Efficiency, Quality Standards for Inspections.

Observations

We found evidence that an employee threatened an acting supervisor and that the postmaster physically struck one employee, pushed the employee, and verbally abused other employees. Both the employee and the postmaster were disciplined for these actions. In addition, district management responded to the incidents appropriately and followed the "zero tolerance policy" regarding violence and inappropriate behavior in the workplace.

Allegations of the Potential for Violence and of Abusive Management at the Arecibo Post Office

As early as 1996 postal management engaged an outside consultant to assess the workplace situation in the Arecibo, Puerto Rico, Post Office. Employees alleged that an employee threatened a supervisor with harm, and the postmaster had physically and verbally threatened employees. In addition, employees alleged that the postmaster had not been disciplined for her actions.

Documents disclosed that since 1996, district management has attempted to improve the working relationship between employees and the Arecibo Postmaster. In addition, one of the employees who complained about the postmaster, alleging that the postmaster used threatening language, was himself suspended for physically threatening an acting supervisor. This employee was subsequently reassigned to another post office.

A February 26, 1998, Inspection Service memo states that since July 1997 inspectors provided attention to allegations about the intimidating management style of the Arecibo postmaster, as well as the employees' perception that nothing was being done to discipline the postmaster. The Inspection Service report stated that the postmaster was accused of striking an employee, and afterward the postmaster was issued a letter of warning in lieu of a 14-day suspension. District management stated that, in addition, the postmaster was removed from her position for six months.

District management sent an organizational development consultant and an Employee Assistance Program coordinator from another district to the post office during the week of August 31, 1998. A climate survey was conducted on-site during that week. In addition, employee interviews were conducted on-site during the first week in December 1998. The results of the survey and interviews disclosed an improved work site; however, more management improvements were needed in the areas of interpersonal skills and performance management training. Employees did not volunteer to participate in opportunities to engage in conflict resolution, which were conducted by a consultant.

On December 7, 1999, a climate assessment team was sent to the Arecibo Post Office. In the team's summary of recommendations, there is no mention of threats of violence or a hostile work environment. However, the report disclosed that there was a perception that management employees at the post office still lacked interpersonal skills.¹

**Postal Service
Response to Alleged
Threats**

The Joint Statement on Violence and Behavior in the Workplace states that the Postal Service will not tolerate violence, or any threats of violence, by anyone at any level of the Postal Service. In addition, the Threat Assessment Team Guide, Publication 108, requires that when an incident occurs, notification be made to the Human Resources manager, the Postal Inspection Service, the senior Labor Relations specialist, the employee and workplace intervention analyst, medical director, district manager, or lead plant manager. The guide further provides that the Human Resources manager or designee will determine whether a meeting needs to be called or whether the situation may be addressed through other threat assessment team members or ad hoc resources.

District management responded to the incidents at the Arecibo Post Office in accordance with the zero tolerance policy regarding violence and inappropriate behavior in the workplace. The Caribbean Threat Assessment Team monitored the situation after the employee threatened the

¹ One of the team members stated that in another district, under similar circumstances, an action plan for improvements would be required and a follow-up assessment would be completed in approximately six to eight months to determine if employee perceptions had improved.

acting supervisor, and the employee was relocated.² District management required that the postmaster attend training; disciplined the postmaster with a suspension; and continues to periodically meet with the postmaster and employees in a continuing effort to ameliorate the situation.

In addition, climate assessments were conducted and an outside threat assessment team was brought into the post office.

Based on the documents we reviewed, New York Metro Area district management has continued to oversee the workplace climate at the Arecibo Post Office and appears committed to continuing the improvement of this post office's employee-management relations.

**Management's
Comments**

We discussed the contents of this report with management, and they elected not to provide written comments.

We plan no further work on these allegations. We appreciate the cooperation and courtesies provided by your staff during this review. If you have any questions, please contact me at (703) 248-2300.

//Signed//
Billy Sauls
Assistant Inspector General
for Employee

cc: Clarence E. Lewis, Jr.
Patrick R. Donahoe
Anthony J. Vegliante
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² An arbitrator determined that this employee cannot ever again work at the Arecibo Post Office.

**Major Contributors to [REDACTED]
This Report**

Report Synopsis

GENERAL INFORMATION

REPORT NUMBER: LM-LA-001 REPORT DATE: _____

REPORT TITLE: Allegation of a of a Hostile Work Environment Caused by
Postmaster in Puerto Rico

EVALUATOR-IN-CHARGE: Joyce Hansen DIRECTOR: Joyce Hansen

FINDINGS/OBSERVATION

NUMBER OF FINDING/OBSERVATIONS: 1

NONCURRENCES: Mgmt did not agree. NA
(Indicate finding/observation headings and numbers)

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.

RECOMMENDATIONS/SUGGESTIONS

NUMBER OF RECOMMENDATION/SUGGESTIONS: 0

NONCURRENCES: Mgmt did not agree. NA
(Indicate recommendation/suggestion headings and numbers)

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.

NUMBER OF CORRECTIVE ACTIONS TAKEN DURING AUDIT: NA

TOTAL FUNDS PUT TO BETTER USE: NA

TOTAL QUESTIONED COST:	NA
UNSUPPORTED COST INCLUDED IN QUESTIONED COST:	NA

Report Summary:

Allegation of a Hostile Work Environment Caused by a Postmaster in Puerto Rico, LM-LA-2000-00X, Date Issued xxx.

This allegation was received in correspondence provided to us by Congressman John McHugh.

We determined that the Postmaster did physically and verbally threaten employees. According to USPS and Inspection Service records, the Postmaster was disciplined and received training to improve her behavior. The USPS sent several Threat Assessment Teams to the Post Office, conducted a workplace climate survey, interviewed Post Office employees, and was committed to improving the workplace environment at the Post Office.

District management followed the USPS published zero tolerance policy regarding violence and inappropriate behavior in the workplace. Employees reported to the Inspection Service the incident of the Postmaster striking an employee, and a report was provided to District Management, which then took appropriate action. In recurring interpersonal incidents, management attempted to resolve conflicts by sending outside parties to assess the workplace climate and meet with employees. It appears that there are no longer threats of violence at the Post Office, based on recent employee interviews.

This report contains no suggestions and requires no response from management. (Project Number XXXXX).