



Office of Inspector General | United States Postal Service

RISC Report

The U.S. Postal Service and Emergency Response: A History of Delivering for the American Public

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Executive Summary

When a natural disaster or other emergency occurs in the United States, the federal government often steps in to assist state and local responders. The U.S. Postal Service is a vital part of our federal emergency response structure. With its nationwide physical network, delivery to all addresses six days a week, and its comprehensive address database, the Postal Service is uniquely positioned to help communities in need. Postal employees and the postal network have been a key part of emergency response for hundreds of years.

The U.S. Postal Service Office of Inspector General (OIG) wanted to explore the history of the Postal Service's involvement in emergency response. To do so, we examined its formal role in federal emergency response, historical examples of postal emergency response efforts, and the Postal Service's actions today to help support the nation during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The Postal Service is formally part of the National Response Framework (NRF), which establishes the nation's strategic response to disasters and emergencies like hurricanes, earthquakes, bioterrorist attacks, pandemics, and other incidents. The Postal Service's role under the NRF is generally aligned with its core operations to deliver mail and physical goods. Restoring delivery after an incident is a critical part of the nation's emergency response. Many Americans need reliable mail service for receiving medications, Social Security checks, and other essentials. Getting the mail up and running again after an emergency can therefore be a lifeline to communities, as well as an important sign of a return to normalcy.

Helping respond to emergencies is nothing new to the Postal Service or the Post Office Department that preceded it. For example, a law passed in 1813 allowed free mailing of a lifesaving vaccine against smallpox, one of the deadliest diseases afflicting the human race for thousands of years. In addition, postal employees helped respond to an outbreak of yellow fever in Jacksonville, FL, in 1888, and to the 1918-1919 influenza pandemic. In more modern times, the Postal Service played a vital role in reviving Selective Service registration after the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan in 1979. And in 2005,

Highlights

The Postal Service is a part of the federal government's emergency response structure, with responsibilities linked to its core mail operations and capabilities.

Restoring mail operations after an emergency is critical because people receive medications and other essential items through the mail.

The Postal Service, and the Post Office Department before it, has a long history of supporting the American public during times of crisis. From helping to distribute smallpox vaccine in 1813 to assisting displaced families with updating their address information after Hurricane Katrina, USPS has been there.

During the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, the Postal Service has provided essential support to the American public. It has mailed millions of stimulus checks, medications, and other critical supplies, as well as provided a backbone for the surge in ecommerce as communities across the nation entered lockdowns.

the Postal Service helped displaced Hurricane Katrina survivors update their addresses so they could communicate with loved ones and receive critical disaster assistance information.

The Postal Service's vital role in emergency response has been demonstrated again through the COVID-19 pandemic. When states and cities entered various stages of lockdown in March 2020, many people depended on online shopping and mail delivery to get medications, food, and other essentials. The Postal Service not only helped make this surge in ecommerce possible, it also

distributed millions of stimulus payments and unemployment checks during the most severe economic downturn since the Great Depression. In addition, the Postal Service used its Informed Delivery platform in partnership with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention to send notifications to more than 20 million Informed Delivery users with critical health information about COVID-19. The Postal Service also helped other federal agencies respond to COVID-19 in several ways, including distributing N95 masks and other personal protective equipment.

The Postal Service's substantial assets and capabilities will surely continue to play a key role in the federal response to COVID-19 and future emergencies, to the benefit of communities everywhere across the country.

Observations

Introduction

A basic premise of emergency management is that response begins and ends at the local level. However, when a disaster strikes and states and localities are unable to provide the necessary resources, it becomes critical that the federal government assist with emergency response. This “all hands on deck” approach can help save lives and ensure that the diverse needs of impacted communities are met, such as search and rescue, clearing of roads, delivering critical supplies, and restoring power. The U.S. Postal Service is a vital part of federal emergency response. With its nationwide physical network, roots in every community, unmatched address information, and carriers’ extensive knowledge of neighborhoods from coast to coast, the Postal Service has unique assets and capabilities to aid in federal response efforts.

No other federal agency can match the Postal Service’s daily presence in every community and nationwide reach, which makes it vital to the nation’s emergency response.

Long before the Postal Service was established, the U.S. Post Office Department helped respond to emergencies that threatened the public.¹ From transporting the first vaccines to assisting with the massive effort to help displaced survivors of Hurricane Katrina, postal employees and the postal network supported the nation during times of crisis. Today, the country — and the world — is facing the most severe pandemic in more than a century. The outbreak of COVID-19 is again highlighting the value of the Postal Service as millions of Americans depend on mail to get essential items like medications, Social Security checks and other payments, letters from family, and household goods during lockdowns.²

The U.S. Postal Service Office of Inspector General (OIG) wanted to understand the Postal Service’s role in emergency response, both historically and as demonstrated in the current crisis. To do so, we conducted research with three

objectives. First, we describe the Postal Service’s role in the federal emergency response structure. Second, we identify select historical examples of how the Postal Service, and the Post Office Department before it, has participated in emergency response. Finally, we highlight how the Postal Service is participating in the national response to the COVID-19 pandemic.³ This white paper describes how the Postal Service participates in federal emergency response, helping to keep the American public safe, secure, and connected.

The Postal Service is Part of the Federal Government’s Emergency Response Structure

The federal government’s emergency response efforts are built around coordination and cooperation between multiple departments and agencies. Even though the Postal Service is a unique federal agency in that it operates almost entirely on revenue rather than appropriations, it is still an integral part of the federal emergency response structure. Postal employees are considered essential workers who carry out their duties to deliver mail even in the face of state or local shelter-in-place orders and current social distancing guidance related to the COVID-19 outbreak.

The Postal Service Has a Formal Role in the National Response Framework

The Postal Service is formally part of the National Response Framework (NRF), which establishes the nation’s strategy for organizing responses to disasters and emergencies like hurricanes, earthquakes, bioterrorist attacks, pandemics, and other incidents. The NRF is overseen by the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) and managed by the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), and provides coordinated guidance to the whole community — including private citizens, businesses, state and local governments and organizations, and federal departments and agencies.

Within the NRF there are fifteen Emergency Support Functions (ESFs) that group together various federal agencies and other organizations based on their

1 The Postal Reorganization Act of 1970 replaced the Post Office Department with the U.S. Postal Service, creating it as an “independent establishment of the executive branch.” 39 U.S.C. § 201.

2 COVID-19 stands for “Coronavirus Disease 2019” and is caused by a novel coronavirus named Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome Coronavirus 2 (SARSCoV-2).

3 [Appendix A](#) further describes the objectives, scope, and methodology of this paper.

resources and capabilities. The goal is to coordinate response efforts in the best way possible to assist the survivors of a disaster or emergency. Each ESF lists a specific federal department or agency as the coordinator, along with a number of primary and support agencies. The Postal Service is designated as a support agency to eight ESFs, which generally align with its core function of delivering mail and physical goods. Table 1 lists the ESFs that designate USPS as a support agency.

Table 1: ESFs that Designate USPS as a Support Agency

ESF #	Title of ESF
1	Transportation
5	Information and Planning
6	Mass Care, Emergency Assistance, Temporary Housing, and Human Services
7	Logistics
8	Public Health and Medical Services
11	Agriculture and Natural Resources
13	Public Safety and Security
15	External Affairs

Source: National Response Framework (Fourth Edition) and Emergency Support Function Annexes, available at <https://www.fema.gov/emergency-managers/national-preparedness/frameworks/response>.

For more information on the federal emergency response structure, including the NRF and ESFs, please see [Appendix B](#). Although these formal duties are

important, delivering the mail is also an important part of emergency response because it can help affected communities get back on their feet.

Restoring Mail Operations is an Important Element of Federal Emergency Response

When people think about the government responding to a natural disaster or other emergency, their initial thoughts might be of first responders checking for survivors, tents being set up for shelter, and food and water being handed out to uprooted families. Indeed, those are all critical aspects of emergency response, but the restoration of mail service is also vital. Many people depend

Restoring mail service is a fundamental part of federal emergency response because people depend on the mail to continue getting medications and other essential items.

on the mail for important things like medications, Social Security checks, and communications with loved ones. Accordingly, after an emergency, the Postal Service focuses on restoring and continuing mail operations, including ensuring that its employees, facilities, vehicles, and the mail are safe and secure.⁴

The federal government recognizes that restoring mail service after an emergency is absolutely critical. When an emergency occurs, there are certain government functions and services that are considered so important that they must be resumed and maintained within 12 hours of the event. These are called Primary Mission Essential Functions (PMEFs).⁵ Nearly all federal executive branch departments, as well as a number of other federal departments and agencies, have at least one designated PMEF. This includes essentials like providing emergency food supplies and maintaining communications systems. The Postal Service has one PMEF — to deliver postal services to the American public.⁶

⁴ The OIG has issued audit reports showing the effectiveness of the Postal Service's response to natural disasters. For example, see OIG, *Response to Extreme Weather Events — Southern Area*, Report No. DR-AR-17-003, April 3, 2017, <https://www.uspsoig.gov/sites/default/files/document-library-files/2017/DR-AR-17-003.pdf>.

⁵ For more information, see U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS) and Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), *Federal Continuity Directive 1: Federal Executive Branch National Continuity Program and Requirements*, January 17, 2017, https://www.fema.gov/sites/default/files/2020-08/fema_federal-continuity-directive1_January2017_011717.pdf and *Federal Continuity Directive 2: Federal Executive Branch Mission Essential Functions and Candidate Primary Mission Essential Functions Identification and Submission Process*, June 13, 2017, https://www.fema.gov/sites/default/files/2020-07/fema_federal-continuity-directive-2_061317.pdf.

⁶ According to FEMA's current PMEF alignment (updated in March 2020), provided by DHS to USPS OIG on August 14, 2020.

The Postal Service Has a Long Tradition of Helping Americans During Times of Crisis

Helping the public during times of crisis is nothing new to the Postal Service. In fact, the Postal Service, and the Post Office Department before it, has a long history of supporting the American public during emergencies. Since the early days of our republic, postal employees and the postal network have been a fundamental part of our nation's emergency response. We present some notable examples below.

1813 Act to Encourage Vaccination

For thousands of years, smallpox was one of the deadliest diseases in human history, killing about three out of every 10 people infected. The discovery of a smallpox vaccine in the late 18th century was the first vaccine ever, but there were concerns about how to distribute the medication and confirm its authenticity. The 1813 Act to Encourage Vaccination established a federal agent to maintain a stock of verified smallpox vaccine and allowed the vaccine to be sent by mail postage-free. In addition, the Act required the federal vaccine agent to forward information to postmasters on how and where the public could apply for the vaccine. The agent was to provide the vaccine by mail to any citizen who applied for it.⁷ The mail was used for nine years in a revolutionary manner to protect Americans against a killer disease. Ultimately, through no fault of the Post Office Department, the act was repealed after the federal agent in charge of the program inadvertently sent the wrong vaccine materials to a community in North Carolina, causing several deaths.⁸

The early postal network allowed for widespread distribution of the first vaccine against smallpox, one of the deadliest diseases in human history.

Yellow Fever Epidemic in 1888

When Jacksonville, FL, became the epicenter of an outbreak of yellow fever in 1888, many people suspected that the disease was being spread through the mail. There were thousands of cases in Jacksonville, as well as hundreds of deaths.⁹ Fear spread in neighboring cities and states. In response to growing concerns, the Post Office Department put in place a system to treat all outgoing mail from Jacksonville in converted boxcars, in which postal workers used spiked paddles to puncture envelopes. After punching holes in the mail, postal workers lit sulfur fires to fumigate all of the letters inside the sealed boxcars. Figure 1 shows an example of the tools used to poke holes in envelopes. The epidemic passed after a few months, and a decade later people understood that yellow fever was spread by mosquitos and not the mail.¹⁰

Figure 1: Spiked Paddle Used to Perforate Mail for Fumigation



Source: Smithsonian National Postal Museum.

7 An Act to Encourage Vaccination, Ch. 37, 2 Stat. 806 (1813), <https://www.loc.gov/law/help/statutes-at-large/12th-congress/session-2/c12s2ch37.pdf>.

8 Tess Lanzarotta, MA, and Marco A. Ramos, PhD, "Mistrust in Medicine: The Rise and Fall of America's First Vaccine Institute," *American Journal of Public Health*, 108(6), June 2018, accessible at <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5944868/>.

9 Cindy Schreuder, "'Yellow Jack' and Hysteria Gripped Florida in 1888. Out of the Chaos of the Epidemic Came a State Health Agency," *Orlando Sentinel*, June 25, 1989, <https://www.orlandosentinel.com/news/os-xpm-1989-06-25-8906260139-story.html>.

10 Nancy A. Pope, "Perforation Paddle: Object Spotlight," Smithsonian National Postal Museum, <https://postalmuseum.si.edu/collections/object-spotlight/perforation-paddle>.

The 1918 Influenza Pandemic

The “Great Influenza” of 1918 to 1919 was the deadliest pandemic of the 20th century. It killed more people around the world than the first World War, including about 675,000 people in the United States alone.¹¹ The Post Office Department played a role in the response to this public health emergency. For example, it assisted in efforts to educate the public about the mysterious disease. Postal workers distributed educational materials from public health officials on their routes, and posters were displayed in post offices.¹² In addition, local health officials used the mail to report new daily cases and deaths to public health departments.¹³

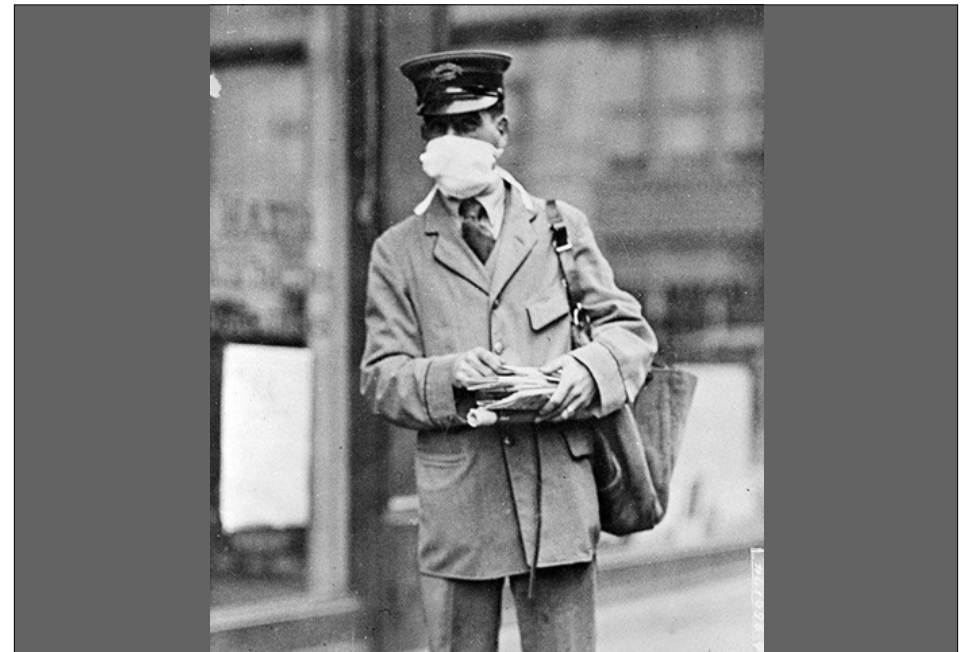
The Post Office was featured, with other organizations, in an advertisement promoting the use of face masks as a public health measure. The announcement declared “WEAR A MASK and Save Your Life!” Some postal employees wore masks while on the job.¹⁴ Because many in-person transactions were deemed unsafe, the public was encouraged to use the mail to accomplish tasks like paying taxes and buying war bonds.¹⁵ In addition, to keep the public from congregating at post offices where crowds could spread the disease, access was restricted and enforced by police departments.¹⁶

Selective Service Registration in 1980

After the Soviet Union launched a sudden invasion of Afghanistan in late December 1979, President Carter responded in several ways, one of which was to reinstate draft registration. However, at that time, the Selective Service System (SSS) had only 98 employees.¹⁷ The government needed some way to reach millions of young men in every community across the nation. With its unmatched physical network, the Postal Service was an ideal solution. Working with the SSS,

the Postal Service prepared every post office in the country for a visit between July 21 and August 2, 1980, by a total of 4 million men.¹⁸ Postal clerks checked the registrations for clarity and completeness, confirmed identities, and forwarded the completed forms to SSS headquarters. The Postal Service’s nationwide network allowed the federal government to respond to this emergency quickly and efficiently.

Figure 2: Mail Carrier Wearing Mask, October 1918



Source: The National Archives, record number 165-WW-269B-15.

11 U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), “History of 1918 Flu Pandemic,” *National Center for Immunization and Respiratory Diseases (NCIRD)*, March 21, 2018, <https://www.cdc.gov/flu/pandemic-resources/1918-commemoration/1918-pandemic-history.htm>.

12 PBS American Experience, “Influenza 1918 Searching for Cures,” <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/influenza-searching-cures/>; Pettit, Dorothy A., “A Cruel Wind: America Experiences Pandemic Influenza, 1918-1920 A Social History.” PhD. Diss., 1976, https://scholars.unh.edu/dissertation/1145?utm_source=scholars.unh.edu%2Fdissertation%2F1145&utm_medium=PDF&utm_campaign=PDFCoverPages, p. 112; and Miles Ott, et al., “Lessons Learned From the 1918–1919 Influenza Pandemic in Minneapolis and St. Paul, Minnesota,” *Public Health Rep.* 2007;122(6), <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC1997248/>.

13 “245 New Influenza Cases,” *The Washington Post*, December 16, 1918, and “Influenza Cases Show Drop of 883,” *The New York Times*, January 30, 1920.

14 U.S. Postal Service, “Pandemic Parallels: Postal Workers, Mail Played Key Roles in 1918 Crisis,” *LINK*, May 5, 2020, <https://link.usps.com/2020/05/05/pandemic-parallels/>.

15 “Must Pay Your Taxes by Mail – Record First-Day Crowd is Dispersed by Flu,” *Los Angeles Times*, October 22, 1918, and “Grip Closes Boston Exchange,” *Wall Street Journal*, September 28, 1918.

16 St. Tammany Parish Library, “The 1918 Influenza Pandemic in St. Tammany Parish: Part 1,” blog, April 15, 2020, <https://www.sttammanylibrary.org/blogs/post/the-1918-influenza-pandemic-in-st-tammany-parish-part-1/>.

17 Congressional Research Service, *The Selective Service System and Draft Registration: Issues for Congress*, Report No. R44452, updated May 1, 2020, <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/R/R44452>, p. 14.

18 Art Harris, “For 4 Million Men, Countdown to Draft Registration,” *The Washington Post*, July 14, 1980, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1980/07/14/for-4-million-men-countdown-to-draft-registration/8cd28ceb-b2c1-40ac-8e8c-b79cd2bd12ea/>.

Responding to Bioterrorism

Shortly after the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, concerns grew over the threat of bioterrorism when letters laced with anthrax began appearing in the mail. This prompted the federal government to create programs like the National Postal Model and the Cities Readiness Initiative. Both were launched in 2004 to ensure rapid distribution of medical countermeasures, such as oral antibiotics that could be self-administered, from the Strategic National Stockpile to residents in large metropolitan areas after a bioterrorism incident, specifically the release of anthrax.¹⁹

From 2004 to 2014, USPS volunteers were part of a program to quickly deliver oral antibiotics in case of a bioterrorist attack.

The National Postal Model, created by the Postal Service, DHS, and the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), became a key component of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's (CDC) larger Cities Readiness Initiative due to USPS's unrivaled last-mile delivery infrastructure. Those assets would enable volunteer mail carriers to

rapidly deliver essential antibiotics directly to the general public.²⁰ Results from a series of comprehensive pilot exercises confirmed that using postal volunteers to bring antibiotics door-to-door was a vital supplement to the Cities Readiness Initiative's existing distribution points for medications and supplies. Not only would postal delivery help to reduce crowds at the distribution points — thereby minimizing the risk for civil unrest — it would also ensure antibiotics made it into the hands of affected residents within 48 hours.²¹

As part of the National Postal Model, each postal volunteer was provided with personal protective equipment (PPE) and a medical kit containing oral antibiotics for storage in their homes in order to protect themselves and their households during a declared public health emergency.²² The National Postal Model was suspended in 2014 after HHS did not replenish expired medical kits for USPS volunteers and withdrew funding that was necessary for the Postal Service to maintain operational capability.²³ Although the National Postal Model remains on hold, the Cities Readiness Initiative is still in place today. It has been reauthorized as one component of a larger federal program that addresses other public health emergencies, including pandemics, but does not contain explicit tasks for the Postal Service.²⁴

Hurricane Katrina

Hurricane Katrina brought great devastation and loss of life when it hit the Gulf Coast in August 2005. Even though more than 500 of its buildings were damaged and 17 destroyed during the 2005 hurricane season, the Postal Service worked quickly to restore its operations and help hard-hit communities.²⁵ Because telephone lines and other communication systems were down in many areas, mail became a key means to re-establish contact. Moreover, mail carriers had extensive knowledge of neighborhoods and their residents, so

"We've always played an important role in helping communities return to normal after a disaster.... That was especially true in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina."

— Senior Director for the former Postmaster General

19 Institute of Medicine (IOM) of the National Academies, "Medical Countermeasures Dispensing: Emergency Use Authorization and the Postal Model: Workshop Summary," 2010, https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK53126/pdf/Bookshelf_NBK53126.pdf, pp. 4, 5, 8, 46.

20 Ibid, p. 41.

21 Joy Leong Consulting, LLC, for the Postal Regulatory Commission, *The Contribution of the Postal Service in National Emergencies: A Case Study of Its Role in Katrina and Its Emergency Preparedness Efforts*, Report No. PRC109909-10-Q-0021, February 14, 2011, https://www.prc.gov/sites/default/files/archived/Emergency_Prep_Report.pdf, pp. 22-27. Forty-eight hours is considered the required amount of time after a biological attack during which citizens must be given prophylactic antibiotics in order to prevent deadly inhalation of anthrax. For more information, see IOM, "Medical Countermeasures Dispensing: Emergency Use Authorization and the Postal Model: Workshop Summary," pp. 41-42.

22 IOM, p. 44.

23 U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO), *U.S. Postal Service: Offering Nonpostal Services through Its Delivery Network Would Likely Present Benefits and Limitations*, Report No. GAO-20-190, December 17, 2019, <https://www.gao.gov/assets/710/703324.pdf>, p. 18.

24 The Pandemic and All-Hazards Preparedness Reauthorization Act of 2013 (PAHPRA) reauthorized several public health preparedness programs, including the Cities Readiness Initiative, emphasizing an all-hazards approach that included both natural and man-made public health threats. See Stephen C. Redd, M.D., "Testimony from Stephen C. Redd, M.D., RADM on Examining the Reauthorization of the Pandemic and All-Hazards Preparedness Act before Committee on Energy and Commerce," Congressional Testimony, June 6, 2018, <https://www.hhs.gov/about/agencies/asl/testimony/2018-06/examining-reauthorization-pahrpa.html> and 42 U.S.C. § 300hh-10(c)(3)(C).

25 Postal Service, "Remembering Katrina: Historic Storm Led to Lasting Changes for USPS," *LINK*, August 27, 2015, <https://link.usps.com/2015/08/27/remembering-katrina/>.

they could provide critical information to local authorities and relief agencies about which areas were damaged the most. Figure 3 depicts a letter carrier delivering mail after Hurricane Katrina.

The storm had displaced a million people in states along the Gulf. The Postal Service used its Address Management System (AMS) database and change of address system to help FEMA locate displaced families and distribute information on disaster assistance programs. At the Houston Astrodome, where thousands of displaced families took shelter, the Postal Service set up a unique ZIP code to help facilitate communications. USPS also made radio announcements providing people with instructions on how to submit a change of address. To help survivors maintain communications, the Postal Service set up emergency post offices at temporary shelters. In addition, it coordinated special delivery of disaster assistance checks.²⁶

Figure 3: Letter Carrier Delivering Mail After Hurricane Katrina



Source: USPS.

²⁶ Joy Leong Consulting, LLC, pp. 5-20.

²⁷ CDC, "Multistate Outbreak of Salmonella Typhimurium Infections Linked to Peanut Butter, 2008-2009 (FINAL UPDATE)," May 11, 2009, <https://www.cdc.gov/salmonella/2009/peanut-butter-2008-2009.html>.

Warnings Regarding Contaminated Meal Kits Provided to Storm Survivors

In the aftermath of heavy snow and catastrophic ice storms that hit Arkansas and Kentucky in February 2009, the Postal Service delivered informational flyers from FEMA to residential addresses and Post Office Boxes. This was considered high priority by FEMA because it had to warn hundreds of thousands of residents about potentially contaminated peanut products contained in Meals Ready to Eat (MREs) that FEMA had distributed to help feed affected citizens at the height of the storms. The peanut butter recall was part of a larger, nationwide salmonella outbreak that had sickened nearly 700 people and was linked to nine deaths.²⁷ According to Postal Service representatives, the flyers were delivered to more than a million addresses in 62 counties across both states.

Assistance Regarding Lead-Tainted Water in Flint, Michigan

When residents of Flint, MI, discovered that lead had contaminated their drinking water due to aging pipes, the Postal Service's AMS database and letter carriers' knowledge of the stricken neighborhoods helped HHS work to bring relief to thousands of families. In February 2016, HHS entered an agreement with the Postal Service to use its address database and carriers' knowledge to identify about 5,000 addresses in the Flint area that were vacant and therefore did not need to receive water filters from HHS. This made the process of attempting to help families in Flint more efficient.

The Postal Service Continues to Support Emergency Response Efforts Today

As part of the nation's critical infrastructure, the Postal Service continues to operate and provide essential services to the American public during the COVID-19 pandemic. The Postal Service continues to support the nation's critical needs, even as the outbreak affects postal operations.

The COVID-19 Outbreak Has Affected Postal Operations

Just like the rest of the country, the outbreak of COVID-19 has impacted the Postal Service's employees and operations. Thousands of postal employees have tested positive for COVID-19 and some have even died. In addition, the coronavirus has altered some of the Postal Service's touchpoints with the public. For example, customer signature requirements are temporarily modified as postal employees verify customer names from a safe distance. Mail carriers and other postal employees are required to wear masks or other face coverings in states or local jurisdictions that require them. The Postal Service also implemented safety measures in post offices, including plastic "sneeze guards" at windows and a social distancing requirement so that customers do not line up too closely to each other. In addition, the Postal Service announces service and facilities impacts on its public website so customers can see whether operations in their area are affected by the current spread of the coronavirus.²⁸

Figure 4: Letter Carrier Wearing a Mask



Source: USPS.

The Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act authorized the Postal Service to take further action to help protect employees and customers — establishing temporary delivery points.²⁹ According to postal management, as of mid-July 2020 the Postal Service had set up such temporary delivery points at places like assisted living facilities where there were concerns about residents' safety.

The Postal Service Provides Crucial Support to the American Public During the COVID-19 Crisis

Even though COVID-19 is affecting the Postal Service's operations and employees, USPS has continued providing the American public with critical services during these challenging times. Postal Service deliveries support Americans' healthcare needs, economic stability, and information access, among other things. And the public has responded positively toward the Postal Service's efforts, at least according to two recent polls. A Pew Research Center poll released in April 2020 found that 91 percent of Americans viewed the

Recent polls have found that 91% of Americans view USPS favorably, and it is considered the single most essential company during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Postal Service favorably — the highest score for any federal department or agency. More recently, in a June 2020 Harris Poll titled "The Essential 100: Company Reputation Amid COVID-19," the Postal Service was ranked as the single most essential company to America during the pandemic — above even companies that produce cleaning and sanitizing products.³⁰

Delivers Essential Medications and Supplies

USPS delivers essential items such as medicine, protective gear, and coronavirus test kits. Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, Americans relied on the Postal Service to deliver medicine and prescription drugs. In fact, the

²⁸ The Postal Service reports service impacts and facility closures on its public website at <https://about.usps.com/newsroom/covid-19/>.

²⁹ CARES Act, Pub. L. No. 116-136 § 6001(c)(2), 134 Stat. 281 (2020).

³⁰ The Pew poll can be accessed at <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2020/04/09/public-holds-broadly-favorable-views-of-many-federal-agencies-including-cdc-and-hhs/>. The Harris poll can be accessed at https://theharrispoll.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/Harris-Poll-100EssentialCompanies_FNL-website.pdf.

Postal Service delivers 1.2 billion prescription drug shipments a year.³¹ With so many American families staying at home most of the time now, mail order prescription delivery has been on the rise. Major pharmaceutical shipper volume grew more than 2 percent between April and late June 2020, compared to the same period in 2019. Postal Service management said that the true growth in prescription shipments was likely even higher due to prescriptions being mailed by senders who are not classified as major pharmaceutical shippers. In addition to medications, the Postal Service also routinely delivers hundreds of millions of laboratory test kits and medical supplies — some of those shipments now include items helpful for fighting the spread of the coronavirus, such as COVID-19 test kits and PPE.

The Postal Service ships more than a billion prescription drugs every year, which is especially critical now for Americans staying at home.

Congress recognizes the importance of the Postal Service sending medical products intended to battle the coronavirus. Under the CARES Act, the Postal Service must prioritize medical product shipments.³² The Postal Service has indicated that delivery of medication remains a priority in transportation, processing, and delivery. To carry out this requirement of the CARES Act, postal management said they work closely with online pharmacies to find ways to handle a large increase in packages from them, as well as coordinate with laboratories shipping COVID-19 test kits by reviewing their packaging ahead of time to help avoid any delays in case those packages do not meet shipping requirements.

Supports the U.S. Economy by Delivering Essential Packages and Payments

The Postal Service's contributions to ecommerce, and distribution of economic stimulus payments and other financial benefits, have been vital to the American public. Online sales are essential during the pandemic. Individuals

and families staying at home, either unable or unwilling to shop for essentials at brick-and-mortar locations, depend on access to ecommerce to keep their households stocked with necessary items. Some small businesses have looked to ecommerce to serve customers and retain employees. The Postal Service supported this shift in consumer buying and saw a year-over-year parcel volume increase of 8.5 percent in March 2020 jump to a 71 percent increase in June 2020.³³

The Postal Service has also supported citizens by delivering crucial payments. USPS supported the U.S. Department of the Treasury (Treasury) in delivering billions of dollars in Economic Impact Payment checks, notification letters, and debit cards authorized by the CARES Act. Although a significant portion of the payments were deposited electronically, the Postal Service delivered those remaining payments that could not be made electronically. Mailings started in April 2020, and as of mid-July, more than 35 million checks, letters, or debit cards had been delivered.

The COVID-19 outbreak led to a more than 71% increase in USPS parcel volume in June 2020 compared to the same month last year, as millions of Americans stayed home and businesses temporarily closed.

Unemployment claims have grown significantly amid the pandemic, and the CARES Act granted states additional unemployment benefits flexibilities.³⁴ For claimants who do not receive their unemployment benefits electronically, the Postal Service delivers those payments. In addition, the Postal Service continues to deliver other important payments, like Social Security benefits, essential to our country's citizens who are older or disabled.

Distributes Important Government Information

During the pandemic, mail has been a critical channel for information between the public and the federal government. In late March 2020, the Postal Service distributed mailers from the White House and CDC containing COVID-19 health-

³¹ National Association of Letter Carriers, "The Postal Service and the COVID-19 Crisis," April 8, 2020, <https://www.nalc.org/government-affairs/legislative-updates/text/COVID-19-white-paper.pdf>.

³² CARES Act, Pub. L. No. 116-136 § 6001(c)(1), 134 Stat. 281 (2020). The CARES Act did not provide any appropriations for the Postal Service.

³³ USPS Preliminary Financial Information (Unaudited) submitted to the Postal Regulatory Commission, March through June 2020.

³⁴ For example, the CARES Act allowed states to temporarily expand unemployment eligibility and permitted a supplemental payment of \$600 per week through July 2020. CARES Act §§ 2101-2116.

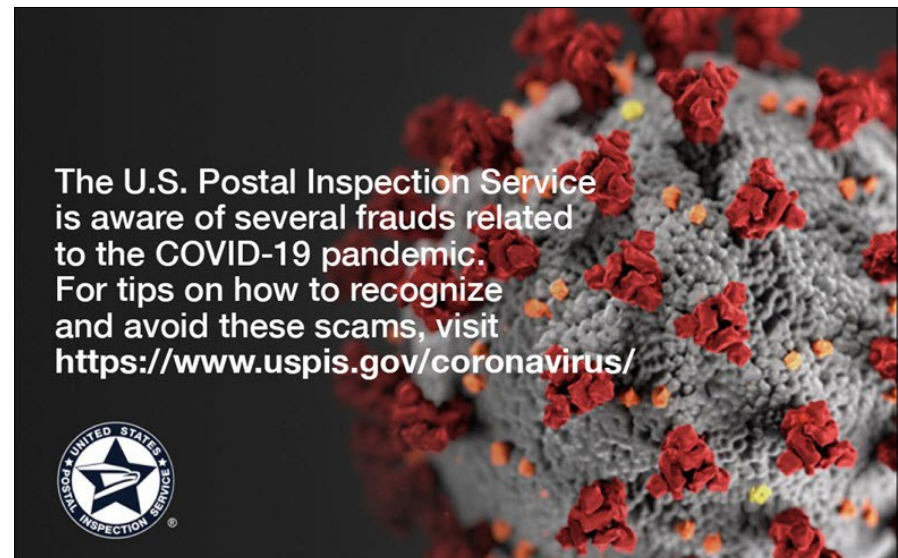
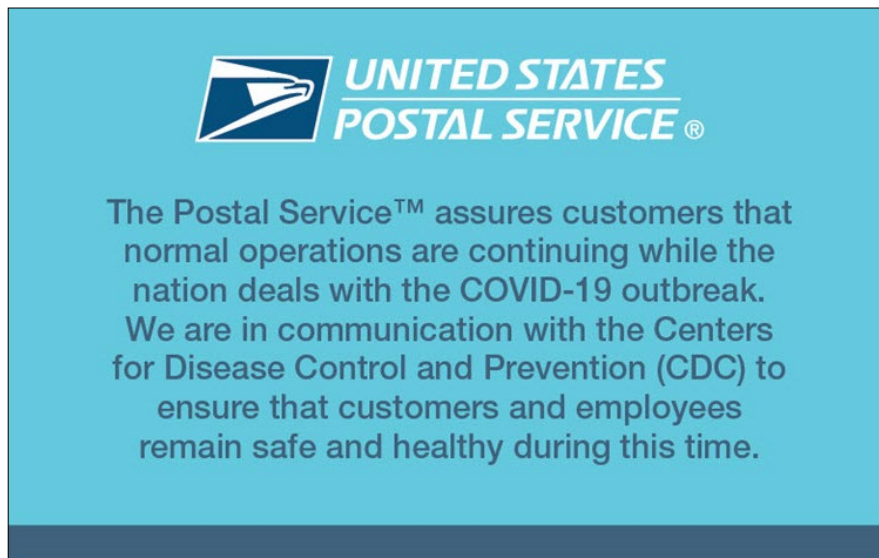
related guidance. The Postal Service and the CDC also teamed up to contact the more than 20 million Informed Delivery subscribers with important health information about the coronavirus.³⁵ Informed Delivery subscribers received a national emergency alert about the coronavirus in their email inboxes, linking

them directly to the CDC website for additional information. In April 2020, the U.S. Postal Inspection Service also used Informed Delivery to send out warnings about fraud schemes taking advantage of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Figure 5: Informed Delivery Messages Related to COVID-19

THE INFORMED DELIVERY PLATFORM HELPED DISTRIBUTE CRITICAL INFORMATION ABOUT COVID-19 SAFETY AND AWARENESS OF COVID-RELATED FRAUD SCAMS

The Postal Service teamed up with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) in March 2020 to provide Informed Delivery users with safety information about COVID-19. The following month, the U.S. Postal Inspection Service used Informed Delivery to warn users about fraud schemes related to COVID-19. Both messages were sent by email and posted in users' Informed Delivery dashboards, with clickable images that took users to dedicated websites with more details. About 20 million Informed Delivery registrants received this critical information.



Source: USPS.

³⁵ Informed Delivery is a free USPS electronic notification system that allows residential customers to preview their mail and track packages. For more information, see USPS's Informed Delivery website at <https://informedelivery.usps.com/>.

In addition, in March 2020, the Postal Service began its single largest First-Class mailing in any 90-day period in USPS history — the 2020 Census mailings.³⁶ Each census helps determine congressional representation and how federal funding for education, infrastructure, and transportation is allocated to communities for the next decade, so gathering responses to the census is tremendously important. In addition to the physical delivery of census forms, the Postal Service offered Informed Delivery subscribers direct access to complete the questionnaire online. The Postal Service’s ability to continue to reach homes virtually and by mail was critically important to these efforts as census field operations were frozen during the pandemic.³⁷

Other Critical Methods of Support During the Pandemic

For many people, receiving cards and mail can provide much-needed connection and comfort in a crisis. According to an April 2020 survey conducted by the Postal Service, 62 percent of respondents said that getting a card or letter in the mail helped them feel more connected while they were social distancing. And 42 percent said they relied more on mail due to social distancing.³⁸ Mail is especially important for those who lack Internet access or are high-risk and socially isolated during the pandemic, like nursing home residents.

The Postal Service also supported distance education for some students. As schools suddenly closed across the nation in March 2020, districts scrambled to implement distance learning. Some districts used the mail to distribute learning packets and laptops to students. This was especially critical for students from families that did not have reliable Internet access or a computer to use.

Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, many Americans depended on the Postal Service for absentee ballots and other mail linked to

A surge of voting by mail is expected for the 2020 general election, and USPS will play a vital role for millions of voters.

elections. Since the onset of the pandemic, many states expanded their vote-by-mail options. Voting by mail in primary elections in 2020 has shed light on some challenges that could emerge in the fall. For example, the OIG found several states provide voters with a deadline to request absentee ballots that are insufficient to ensure delivery before the election.³⁹ We are continuing to evaluate the voting-by-mail challenges in current audit work.

The Postal Service’s Role in the Federal Response to COVID-19

The federal government has responded to the COVID-19 pandemic under a “whole-of-nation” approach that involves coordination between many different departments and agencies.⁴⁰ In addition to the actions mentioned above — such as delivery of national health mailers and economic stimulus payments — the Postal Service has also assisted with other parts of the federal response to COVID-19, including the following:

- **Donating N95 Masks.** According to postal management, as part of an agreement with FEMA, HHS, and DHS, the Postal Service donated 500,000 N95 masks in late March 2020. These masks went to states in the Northeast, primarily New York, which at that time was the epicenter of the pandemic in the United States.
- **Distributing PPE.** Working with FEMA, HHS, and other agencies, the Postal Service has distributed, stored, labeled, and delivered PPE like N95 and surgical masks. These vital supplies went to federal, state, local, and tribal agencies, as well as other organizations involved in the response to COVID-19. [Figure 6](#) depicts a postal employee loading boxes of PPE at a FEMA facility, intended for distribution to Immigration and Customs Enforcement employees.

³⁶ The 2020 Census mailings required the Postal Service to send 590 million pieces of First-Class Mail beginning in March 2020. For more information, see <https://link.usps.com/2020/04/01/survey-says-7/>.

³⁷ GAO, *2020 Census: COVID-19 Presents Delays and Risks to Census Count*, Report No. GAO-20-551R, June 9, 2020, <https://www.gao.gov/assets/710/707456.pdf>, p. i.

³⁸ The full survey results can be viewed on the Postal Service website at <https://postalpro.usps.com/market-research/covid-mail-attitudes>. The OIG did not assess or verify the results or methodology of USPS’s survey.

³⁹ A recent OIG audit on the timeliness of ballot mail in the Milwaukee, WI, area during April 2020 elections identified issues that have nationwide implications for the general election. For more information, see OIG, *Timeliness of Ballot Mail in the Milwaukee Processing & Distribution Center Service Area*, Report No. 20-235-R20, July 7, 2020, <https://www.uspsoig.gov/sites/default/files/document-library-files/2020/20-235-R20.pdf>.

⁴⁰ GAO, *COVID-19: FEMA’s Role in the Response and Related Challenges*, Report No. GAO-20-685T, July 14, 2020, <https://www.gao.gov/assets/710/708097.pdf>, p. 4.

Figure 6: Postal Worker Loads Boxes of PPE at FEMA Facility



Source: FEMA / photo by Rudy Marshall. (Note: The OIG modified this image to blur out a corporate logo.)

The Postal Service is seeking reimbursement for this work pursuant to two FEMA Mission Assignments and an Interagency Agreement executed by the Postal Service and HHS.

Conclusion

Serving the public during times of crisis is nothing new for the Postal Service. Since the early days of our republic, postal employees and the postal network have played a critical role in supporting efforts to respond to natural disasters, public health crises, and other emergencies. This experience and commitment to the public is evident now as the Postal Service helps our country during the worst pandemic in a century.

Appendices

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Appendix A: Additional Information

Objectives, Scope, and Methodology

The OIG conducted qualitative research including looking at historical records to document the Postal Service's involvement in emergency response efforts. The objectives of this research project were to:

- Describe the Postal Service's role in the federal emergency response structure.
- Identify select historical examples of how the Postal Service participated in emergency response.
- Describe how the Postal Service has participated in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

To gather data for our analysis we used the following methods:

- We assessed documents from the Postal Service, the Department of Homeland Security, and other government agencies, including publicly

available information. This also included recent information obtained from the Postal Service on how it has responded to the COVID-19 pandemic.

- We conducted historical research to find select examples of the Post Office Department and Postal Service responding to emergency situations affecting the public. We chose historical examples that we believed had both national importance and relevance to issues facing the country today.

The OIG conducted work for this white paper in accordance with the Council of the Inspectors General on Integrity and Efficiency's Quality Standards for Inspection and Evaluation (January 2012). We discussed our observations and conclusions with Postal Service management on August 24, 2020, and included their comments where appropriate.

Prior Coverage

The OIG did not identify any prior audit reports or reviews related to the objectives of this white paper.

Appendix B: Additional Details on the Postal Service’s Role in Federal Emergency Response

The U.S. National Preparedness System

The U.S. government manages disasters and emergencies through its National Preparedness System.⁴¹ The overarching National Preparedness Goal is a “secure and resilient nation with the capabilities required across the whole community to prevent, protect against, mitigate, respond to, and recover from the threats and hazards that pose the greatest risk.”⁴² The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) coordinates the National Preparedness System and its corresponding goal across five national planning frameworks: Prevention, Protection, Mitigation, Response, and Recovery.⁴³ Of these five frameworks, the Postal Service has a formal role in only one — the National Response Framework (NRF).

National Response Framework

The NRF presents guiding principles for how public and private stakeholders, including federal, state, tribal, and local governments, businesses, voluntary

organizations, and other entities, prepare for and provide a unified national response to all types of disasters and emergencies. The NRF contains fifteen Emergency Support Functions (ESFs) that group together various federal agencies and other organizations based on the resources and capabilities needed to execute tasks designated in the ESFs.⁴⁴

Each ESF lists a specific federal department or agency as the coordinator, along with a number of primary and support agencies. The Postal Service is designated as a support agency to eight ESFs, which generally cover areas that align with its core function of delivery of mail and physical goods. When an ESF is activated after an emergency or disaster, support agencies like USPS can have either general or specific tasks assigned to them in order to help the primary agency execute and accomplish the mission of the ESF. Table 2 below shows the eight ESFs to which the Postal Service is designated, and potential tasks associated with those ESFs. These tasks are either USPS-specific or applicable to all support agencies, including the Postal Service.⁴⁵

41 The National Preparedness System was created in 2011 by Presidential Policy Directive 8 (PPD 8): National Preparedness. PPD 8 supersedes the 2003 Homeland Security Presidential Directive 8 (HSPD 8): National Preparedness. The purpose of PPD 8 was to set up national policies to guide emergency preparedness, which was mandated in the Post-Katrina Emergency Reform Act of 2006 (P.L. 109-295). See Jared T. Brown, *Presidential Policy Directive 8 and the National Preparedness System: Background and Issues for Congress*, Congressional Research Service, October 21, 2011, <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/R/R42073>, p. 1.

42 Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), National Preparedness Goal, <https://www.fema.gov/emergency-managers/national-preparedness/goal>.

43 FEMA, a component of the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), is the lead federal agency responsible for disaster preparedness, response, and recovery. See FEMA, National Preparedness System, <https://www.fema.gov/emergency-managers/national-preparedness/system> and DHS, *Disaster Operations Legal Reference, Version 3.1*, May 2018, pp. xxii-xxiv.

44 DHS, *National Response Framework (Fourth Edition)*, October 29, 2019, https://www.fema.gov/sites/default/files/2020-04/NRF_FINALApproved_2011028.pdf, pp. 5-6, 21-22.

45 For the purposes of this paper, we only discuss the ESFs to which the Postal Service is designated a role in Table 2.

Table 2: ESFs that Designate USPS as a Support Agency, and Relevant Tasks

ESF #	ESF Title	Description of Task(s)	Applies To
1	Transportation	Collects and reports on transportation infrastructure disruption and damages as information becomes available.	USPS
5	Information and Planning	Provides accurate and timely information related to an actual or potential incident. Develops and executes plans related to an actual or potential incident. Develops operational plans and procedures to inform internal coordination and execution of objectives and tasks set forth in the NRF and Federal Interagency Operational Plans.	All support agencies
6	Mass Care, Emergency Assistance, Temporary Housing, and Human Services	Provides extended mail services to relocated persons. Provides change of address cards for survivors to notify the USPS of relocation addresses for mail forwarding; assists in the distribution, collection, and mailing of those cards; and provides an electronic file of address-change information furnished by survivors.	USPS
7	Logistics	Provides support in the delivery of information/supplies to disaster survivors.	USPS
8	Public Health and Medical Services	Assists in the distribution and transportation of medicine, pharmaceuticals, and medical information to the general public affected by a major disaster or emergency, as needed.	USPS
11	Agriculture and Natural Resources	In the event of a plant or animal disease, can help enforce a quarantine if so authorized or deputized by the Attorney General [together with DHS, the Department of Justice, and the Department of Transportation].	USPS
13	Public Safety and Security	Participates in the ESF #13 Stakeholder Committee and Advisory Board. Provides general and specialized resources to assist in the ESF #13 response.	All support federal departments and agencies with law enforcement resources
15	External Affairs	Support the National Response Framework ESF #15 organization and staff.	All support agencies

Source: National Response Framework (Fourth Edition) and Emergency Support Function Annexes, available at <https://www.fema.gov/emergency-managers/national-preparedness/frameworks/response>.

A number of legal authorities guide the structure, development, and implementation of the NRF, including statutes, regulations, Executive Orders, and Presidential Directives.⁴⁶ Under the Robert T. Stafford Disaster Relief and Emergency Assistance Act (Stafford Act), the Postal Service may be legally required to assist in emergency response.⁴⁷ In addition, Homeland Security Presidential Directive 5 (HSPD 5): Management of Domestic Incidents is another legal authority that designates the Postal Service as a federal department and agency required to participate in national emergency response.⁴⁸ There are other federal emergency management laws and regulations that are not binding for the Postal Service and therefore are beyond the scope of this white paper.

When called upon or authorized by FEMA to assist, there are two primary ways federal departments and agencies can be reimbursed for their emergency response activities. First, after a presidential disaster declaration, FEMA may activate ESFs and issue a mission assignment to an agency under the Stafford Act, for which there is a formal reimbursement mechanism. Second, when damage does not warrant a disaster declaration but ESFs are still activated, federal departments and agencies may execute reimbursable interagency agreements.⁴⁹

46 DHS, "National Response Framework: List of Authorities and References," 2008, <https://www.fema.gov/pdf/emergency/nrf/nrf-authorities.pdf> and *Disaster Operations Legal Reference, Version 3.1*, May 2018, pp. 4-2 to 4-10.

47 FEMA, "Robert T. Stafford Disaster Relief and Emergency Assistance Act, Public Law 93-288, as amended, 42 U.S.C. 5121 et seq., and Related Authorities," https://www.fema.gov/sites/default/files/2020-03/stafford-act_2019.pdf, p. 2.

48 The creation of the NRF's predecessor, the 2004 National Response Plan, was mandated by the Homeland Security Act of 2002 and HSPD 5. See DHS, "Homeland Security Presidential Directive 5 (HSPD 5): Management of Domestic Incidents, February 28, 2003, <https://www.dhs.gov/publication/homeland-security-presidential-directive-5>; DHS, Homeland Security Act of 2002, P.L. 107-296, November 25, 2002, <https://www.dhs.gov/homeland-security-act-2002> and DHS, National Response Plan, December 2004, <https://www.hsdl.org/?view&did=450766>.

49 FEMA, "Robert T. Stafford Disaster Relief and Emergency Assistance Act, Public Law 93-288, as amended, 42 U.S.C. 5121 et seq., and Related Authorities," p. 12 and DHS, "Financial Management Support Annex," June 2016, https://www.fema.gov/sites/default/files/2020-07/fema_nrf_support-annex_financial.pdf, p. 8.

Appendix C: Management's Comments

PATRICK A. MENDONCA
SENIOR DIRECTOR
OFFICE OF THE CHIEF LOGISTICS AND PROCESSING OFFICER



September 4, 2020

JENNIFER MYKIJEWYCZ, OPERATIONS CENTRAL, RESEARCH AND INSIGHTS SOLUTION CENTER

SUBJECT: The U.S. Postal Service and Emergency Response: A History of Delivering for the American Public

We would like to thank the Office of the Inspector General for the opportunity to review 'The U.S. Postal Service and Emergency Response: A History of Delivering for the American Public' and have no further comments.

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Patrick A. Mendonca".

Patrick A. Mendonca

475 L'ENFANT PLAZA SW
WASHINGTON DC 20260-0061
WWW.USPS.COM



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

For media inquiries, contact Agapi Doulaveris
Telephone: 703-248-2286