
**Hearing before Subcommittee on Federal Workforce,
U.S. Postal Service and the Census
Committee on Oversight and Government Reform
House of Representatives**



Oral Statement

Ensuring Data Security at the Postal Service

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Mr. Chairman and members of the committee, thank you for the opportunity to discuss our recent audit report on mail covers. Mail covers have been an investigative tool for more than 100 years, used for tracking financial frauds, drug trafficking, and other criminal activity. A mail cover involves postal officials recording the information from the outside of a mail piece, such as the sender's address. However, the mail cover program does not permit opening letters and packages that are sealed against inspection as this requires a search warrant. To be clear, the program should not be confused with the operational imaging of mail pieces to manage mail flows.

The U.S. Postal Service processed approximately 49,000 mail covers in fiscal year (FY) 2013. Mail covers can be requested either by external investigators, including my office, or by the Postal Inspection Service. There are different types:

- Mail covers that target individuals in suspected criminal matters,
- Mail covers that target postal facilities where mail and parcels associated with criminal activity are passing, and
- Special mail covers used for national security purposes.

The OIG is responsible for auditing the investigative activities of the Postal Inspection Service. As part of this work and in response to public concern, we conducted an audit of the handling of external mail covers. The report was issued in May. For this initial audit, we examined samples of both external criminal mail

cover requests and special mail cover files. We are now beginning an audit of internal mail covers.

Federal, state, and local law enforcement agencies can request a criminal mail cover by sending a hard copy form to the Postal Inspection Service's Criminal Investigations Service Center in Chicago. The request must specify the statute thought to have been violated and include a description of how the mail cover will further the investigation.

These forms are manually entered into an electronic system for approval. Only the chief postal inspector, the manager of the Criminal Investigations Service Center, or their designees can approve mail covers. Most criminal mail covers are approved: in FY 2013 the Postal Inspection Service received more than 6,000 outside requests and denied 10.

When a mail cover is approved, it is forwarded to the appropriate facility where Postal Service staff photocopy the mail pieces or log the information. The facility then mails the records to the Inspection Service to pass on to the original requestors. Requestors are instructed not to copy mail cover records and must return them 60 days after the mail cover period ends.

Our audit found that mail cover procedures are not always followed:

- In 13 percent of cases, external mail cover requests were approved without adequate justification either because the requestor did not include sufficient justification in the request or the justification was not adequately entered into the electronic system.
- Authority to approve mail covers was not always delegated appropriately: 21 percent of mail cover requests were not approved by authorized individuals.
- The Postal Inspection Service did not ensure that outside law enforcement returned mail cover information on time. In 61 percent of cases, mail cover records were not returned within 60 days as required.
- The computer system used to process mail covers had flaws. We found more than 900 cases where the system incorrectly showed a mail cover was active even though the cover period had ended. System problems also prevented mail covers from being extended, and sometimes the same tracking number would be issued to different requests.
- There were delays in processing mail covers both by the Postal Inspection Service and at Postal Service facilities.
- Finally, the Postal Inspection Service did not carry out its required annual reviews of the program.

Our audit recommended that the Postal Service and Inspection Service improve controls over the mail covers program, establish procedures to ensure the

required program reviews are conducted, and fix the electronic system. The Postal Service and the Inspection Service agreed with our findings and recommendations and set target dates to implement solutions. Two of the four original target dates have now been extended to March 2015. My office will continue to track the Postal Service's progress.

Mail covers are an important law enforcement tool, but adequate supervision is critical to ensure the protection of the public.