

CRS Report for Congress

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Postal Service for Katrina Survivors

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Summary

The U.S. Postal Service has experienced many disasters in the past, and it was relatively well prepared for the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. While the hurricane damaged some 500 post offices, the Postal Service was able to establish limited services just days after the disaster. For those now displaced from their homes, USPS says that it can provide relatively efficient delivery service if customers submit a change of address form in person, by toll-free telephone, or on the Internet. USPS has no current plans to request congressional appropriations for the costs it has incurred in restoring operations. This report will be updated weekly.

Every large-scale hurricane within memory has affected areas served by the U.S. Postal Service (USPS), and that institution has long experience with the challenge of reconstituting mail delivery. The post-Katrina challenge poses a highly visible test of its capability, resilience, and reputation. USPS was relatively well prepared for Hurricane Katrina, and its performance in the aftermath has been generally well reviewed in the media.

As early as August 26, USPS was anticipating a landfall in the Gulf Coast and was diverting some mail from processing plants in that region to minimize the effects of potential disruption to its processing capabilities.¹ Nevertheless, the hurricane's force and subsequent flooding were destructive to postal facilities and operations. By the time the storm passed on August 30, some 500 postal facilities in Alabama, Mississippi, and Louisiana had been damaged and were incapable of providing delivery service.²

The timing of the storm was critical for the Postal Service, since the first two or three days of the month are when many people dependent on Social Security, public assistance, and annuity income typically expect their checks in the mail. On September 1, USPS set up temporary centers for the pickup of checks in Escatawpa, Biloxi, and Gulfport, in Mississippi, and in Louisiana at Hammond, Covington, LaPlace, and Des Allemands, and

¹ "Postal Service Operations and Delivery Update," briefing by Thomas G. Day, Senior Vice President, Government Relations, U.S. Postal Service, Sept. 7, 2005.

² Ibid.

another opened later in Mobile, Alabama.³ In New Orleans proper, two post offices (La Place and Gonzales) were designated as Social Security check pickup points for a short period of time.⁴ Some 15,000 persons received Social Security checks alone from these centers.⁵

Restoration of Regular Service

Reconstituting regular mail delivery in the areas affected by Hurricane Katrina has been a priority since the storm, and USPS has made substantial progress to date. As of September 7, USPS reported that full service had been restored to 188 of the affected post offices, and partial service to 189.⁶ In 120 post offices (some of which no longer exist) there is no service. In terms of daily deliveries, all service has been resumed in Alabama, but 100,000 addresses in Mississippi lack service, and 720,000 in Louisiana.⁷ Mobile units have been brought to some of these areas, where customers can pick up mail and purchase retail services.

The list of closed post offices continues to change, and USPS has posted on its website a color-coded map,⁸ updated daily, showing which ZIP codes have full, partial, and no delivery service.

Periodicals and standard (advertising) mail is not being accepted for delivery to any post offices in southern Louisiana or Mississippi.⁹ When this situation changes, it will be carried on USPS.com.¹⁰

Delivery of Mail to Dislocated Customers

While restoration of service to the areas damaged by the hurricane itself is a familiar task for the Postal Service, the sudden displacement of hundreds of thousands of customers from New Orleans is unprecedented. Fortunately, USPS has spent millions upgrading its national change of address (NCOA) system in recent years, because forwarding mail for the millions of households that move every year is a major cost to its regular operations. USPS now has the capability, through innovations in sorting

³ “U.S. Postal Service Establishes Temporary Locations for Social Security Check Distribution for Hurricane Katrina Victims,” U.S. Postal Service News Release no. 05-068, Sept. 1, 2005.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ “Postal Service Operations and Delivery Update,” briefing by Thomas G. Day, Senior Vice President, Government Relations, U.S. Postal Service, Sept. 7, 2005.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ The map is available at [<http://www.usps.com/communications/news/serviceupdates/zipmap.htm?from=bannercommunications&page=katrinamap>].

⁹ “Postal Service Operations and Delivery Update,” briefing by Thomas G. Day, Senior Vice President, Government Relations, U.S. Postal Service, Sept. 7, 2005.

¹⁰ Specifically, see [<http://www.usps.com/communications/news/serviceupdates.htm?from=bannercommunications&page=katrina#>].

technology, to intercept mail at its original sorting point that is addressed to an address that has changed, and re-route the mail to a new address. Thus, it can avoid the cost and delay of physically transporting mail to the former delivery post office for flagging and forwarding under a local change of address request.

For the current situation, USPS is urging all postal patrons who have been relocated to file a change of address form at their new location. The form can be filed at a post office, by toll-free telephone (1-800-ASK-USPS), or on the Internet at [<http://www.USPS.com>]. The form will enable USPS to direct mail to a new address from its point of origin, whether the new address is a relative's home, a Red Cross shelter, or temporary rental quarters. Recognizing that many of the displaced customers will move again before long, USPS has made it clear that multiple changes of addresses cause no problem, since the NCOA is an electronic system and can easily be updated. In addition, USPS has waived indefinitely, for those affected by the hurricane, the usual 30-day limit on forwarding mail to a new address.¹¹

All of this is dependent on the USPS having a change of address on record, however. USPS has reached out to shelters to urge that the forms be filed, postal representatives have appeared in countless media, and the Postmaster General has appeared on national television to make the same point.

Paying the Costs of Recovery

As of September 7, USPS estimated that its physical losses would be well over \$100 million.¹² While some in Congress have anticipated that USPS would request appropriations to cover some or all of its unanticipated costs, USPS has told congressional staff that it has no current plans to do so. The Postal Reorganization Act (codified in Title 39, United States Code) charges USPS with covering its costs through the revenues it collects from the mailing public, and USPS has been reluctant to seek appropriations (and the congressional controls that sometimes accompany them) for support of its delivery operations.

¹¹ "Postal Service Operations and Delivery Update," briefing by Thomas G. Day, Senior Vice President, Government Relations, U.S. Postal Service, Sept. 7, 2005.

¹² Ibid.