A Grand Alliance
TO SAVE OUR PUBLIC POSTAL SERVICE

A People's Postal Agenda

White paper for discussion at the

People's Postal Summit

March 16, 17, and 18, 2021

Summary

The U.S. Postal Service was created nearly 250 years ago to help bind people together into one unified nation. Since its founding, the Postal Service has continually reinvented itself in response to changes in technology and social needs. Once again, it's time to re-imagine how this public service can innovate to meet today's challenges. Instead of job and service cuts or privatization, we need a People's Postal Agenda that leverages our nation's extensive postal assets to address unmet needs and sustain this vital service for generations to come.

1. **Provide affordable financial services:** USPS should help meet the need for affordable, trustworthy financial services, particularly among low-income communities and families of color who now must rely on predatory financial firms.

2. **Shift to a clean renewable energy economy:** USPS should take actions to drive a just transition, including replacing its delivery fleet with electric vehicles, install charging stations at post offices, and expanding solar panel installation on its properties.

3. **Make communities safer and governments smarter:** Postal workers already play an informal "neighborhood watch" role. Monitors on postal vehicles could expand that role by gathering data on public safety and environmental risks, from potholes to pollution.

4. **Strengthen our care infrastructure:** USPS could expand their alert service to enlist postal workers in a check-in system that makes it easier for seniors and the disabled to live independently and supports their families and caregivers.

5. **Protect our democracy:** Allowing all Americans to mail in their election ballots would help counter racist voter suppression and increase participation, particularly among low-income, disabled, older, and rural voters who face challenges getting to the polls.

6. **Narrow the digital divide:** USPS should anchor an initiative to expand broadband access, particularly in underserved rural areas.

7. **Support good jobs:** All postal workers should have decent pay and benefits and the right to bargain collectively. The Postal Service contributes to local economies and anchors a mailing industry that employs millions of Americans.

8. **Protect public health:** The door-to-door postal network could be leveraged even more strategically in the face of future crises, while post offices could become community wellness hubs.

9. **Keep deliveries affordable for small businesses and consumers**: During the pandemic, Americans have become even more reliant on e-commerce. USPS must continue to provide universal, affordable service for everyone, no matter where they live.

10. **Support food security and local producers:** USPS could expand on its experience with perishables to provide affordable delivery services for local food producers and people who have difficulty getting to grocery stores.

Introduction

The U.S. Post Office, the predecessor of the United States Postal Service, was created in 1775 — a year before the Declaration of Independence — to help bind people together into one unified nation. In the two and a half centuries since its founding, the Postal Service has continually reinvented itself in response to changes in technology and social needs:

- After the 19th Century Gold Rush drew people to California, the Pony Express cut delivery times between the Mississippi River and the West Coast by 10 days;
- Rural free delivery, launched in 1902, helped connect the half of the population that lived outside of cities;
- Nationwide parcel post led to an explosion of catalog retailing;
- Investment in new transport technologies, from the earliest post roads to railroads and airplanes, created more reliable mail delivery while expanding transport options to better connect family, friends, and customers, near and far.

Our time is no different than times past. As the Postal Service approaches its 250th birthday, communication needs and preferences continue to evolve, creating both challenges and new opportunities.

Once again, it's time to re-imagine how this service, which we as Americans jointly own and benefit from, can innovate to meet today's needs. Instead of job and service cuts or privatization, we should be exploring opportunities for leveraging USPS's assets to address an array of unmet public needs while also generating revenue in ways that would sustain USPS for generations to come.

USPS has an incredibly strong foundation on which to build, with extensive and valuable resources and infrastructure.

Assets of the Postal Network

People: The 675,500 employees of the United States Postal Service collect, process, and deliver mail and packages to more than 161 million homes and businesses at least six days a week. USPS has been a particularly important source of decent jobs for Black workers, who make up nearly a quarter of the workforce, and veterans, who comprise more than 14 percent.

Property: USPS owns or leases 31,322 post office buildings, making it the nation's largest operator of retail establishments. This exceeds the number of stores and restaurants operated by Subway (23,347); YUM Brands, the parent of KFC, Taco Bell, and Pizza Hut (18,120); Dollar Tree (15,062); Dollar General (16,979); McDonald's (13,686); and Starbucks (15,041).

Vehicles: The Postal Service's fleet of 231,541 vehicles is the largest in the nation. USPS trucks travel over four million miles on the nation's roads six days a week, covering the largest area of any business or government agency in America.

The People's Postal Agenda will leverage these valuable network assets to ensure that the U.S. Postal Service continues to meet our country's most pressing needs for generations to come.

1. Provide affordable financial services

Big Wall Street banks have largely abandoned poor people, particularly poor people of color, forcing them to rely on high-cost, predatory financial firms. According to an FDIC survey, 13.8 percent of Black households and 12.2 percent of Latino households did not have bank accounts in 2019, compared to just 2.5 percent of white households. Lower-income households and adults with disabilities were also more likely than other Americans to be "unbanked."

Among families without bank accounts, the most-cited reason was that they couldn't afford minimum balance requirements. Other major reasons included distrust of banks, high and unpredictable fees, and inconvenient locations. A 2019 S&P Global report documented the shuttering of bank branches in Black neighborhoods over the past decade. JPMorgan, for example, reduced the number of branches in majority-Black areas by 22.8 percent from 2010 to 2018, compared to a decline of 0.2 percent in the rest of the country.

Families without bank accounts have little choice but to turn to financial firms that charge high fees. For example, 31.9 percent of unbanked households use check cashing services, compared to 5.5 percent of all U.S. households, and 14.4 percent of the unbanked use bill payment services (e.g., Western Union and MoneyGram), compared to 4.9 percent of all households.

With more than 31,000 post offices across the country and a high level of public trust, USPS is well-positioned to provide dependable, affordable financial services. This would be nothing new. In fact, the public Postal Service offered savings accounts from 1911 to 1967. At its height in 1947, the Post Office held $3.4 billion ($39 billion in today's dollars) on behalf of American savers, which was about 10 percent of the total amount of savings in U.S. financial institutions. These services were suspended in the face of a sustained campaign by right-wing political organizations and Wall Street banks that didn't want the competition.

Today the United States is one of the few major nations that does not offer its citizens postal banking services. In fact, globally, financial services accounted for 17 percent of total postal system revenue in 2018, up from 14.5 percent in 2001. In the United States, 2020 revenue from money orders (the primary USPS financial service) was just $146 million, less than 0.2 percent of total revenue.

The Postmaster General already has the authority to expand basic financial services, including the operation of ATMs, bill-paying, check-cashing, and wire transfers (currently offered to only a limited number of locations). A 2015 USPS Office of the Inspector General report found that such services could generate as much as $1.1 billion in annual revenue after five years — all while dramatically expanding financial services for low-income Americans. The OIG concluded the Postal Service is "well suited" to provide such services, noting its presence in every neighborhood and that its "well-trained workforce is already experienced at handling complex transactions and watching out for related fraud and other risks."

Congressional lawmakers are also considering proposals to establish individual FedAccounts accessible at post offices, in conjunction with the Federal Reserve, or to restore a Treasury-backed postal savings system.

2. Shift to a clean renewable energy economy

With its vast infrastructure and vehicle fleet, USPS could play a major role in driving the transition to a clean renewable energy economy. The need to replace the agency's aging vehicles represents a tremendous opportunity to both accelerate this transition and support good U.S. jobs in cutting-edge auto manufacturing technologies. The Postal Service's current boxy delivery vehicles are decades old, get 10 miles per gallon, and are not designed to hold the number of packages USPS now handles. Vehicle fuel and maintenance costs amounted to $1.7 billion in 2019.

Postmaster General Louis DeJoy recently announced a 10-year contract through which USPS will spend as much as $6 billion over a decade for up to 165,000 new vehicles. In Congressional testimony, DeJoy said he would only commit to having electric vehicles make up 10 percent of the new fleet, although retrofitting could be possible in the future. Several members of Congress have called on President Biden to halt the contract, pointing out that it falls far short of Biden's stated goal of a 100 percent electric federal fleet.

As part of a renewable energy transition, USPS should also provide electric vehicle charging stations for both consumers and the Postal Service's new fleet. Researchers estimate that $30-$50 billion in investments for consumer-side infrastructure will be needed across the United States to support projected electric vehicle growth. Empowering USPS to make investments in communities across the nation through charging stations will ensure that consumers and small businesses have the confidence to invest in this new technology.

Installation of solar panels on USPS properties could help generate energy for these electric vehicle charging stations and for other purposes. Excess power could be sold back into the grid, generating additional revenue for the Postal Service. USPS has already installed 38,000 solar panels to power a large sorting facility in Los Angeles.

The Postal Service has long been a recycling leader. In 2020 USPS recycled 182,000 tons of paper, 63,000 tons of cardboard and 6,000 tons of plastic. Their Blue Earth Program offers a range of services to public and private sector customers, including collecting used electronic and printer cartridges from participating federal agencies and recycling them without shipping or disposition costs. It also offers shippers a Secure Destruction Program which intercepts undeliverable mail and securely recycles it. Blue Earth Carbon Accounting provides large mailers with customized statements of the carbon emissions associated with their mailings.

USPS could increase its revenue and deepen its environmental commitments by recycling printer cartridges and certain electronics in local post offices nationwide, and by using its carbon footprint metrics in other transportation/logistics markets, including providing consumers estimates of the carbon costs of their online shipments.

3. Make communities safer and governments smarter

As they deliver mail and packages door-to-door across the country, postal workers already play an informal "neighborhood watch" role that makes our communities safer. With its vast delivery network, the Postal Service could play a more systematic role in monitoring neighborhoods to increase public safety, environmental health, and the efficiency of public services.

Government agencies and private corporations are developing a wide range of monitoring programs that USPS could potentially carry out more effectively for less money. For example, two-thirds of American cities have begun to adopt "smart city" technologies to gather data on potholes, water leaks, unplowed roads, and other city service problems. But most of these technologies depend on voluntary citizen reporting, which means coverage will be spotty. Federal, state, and local environmental agencies also spend considerable public revenue monitoring air quality and greenhouse gases that might be more effectively handled by USPS.

Some private businesses have also developed technologies to gather information about environmental dangers. Many natural gas utilities, for example, equip their vehicles to monitor for leaks that endanger public health and contribute to climate change. But the need for more robust monitoring is critical. Citizens who happened to notice natural gas smells reported many of the more than 8,000 leaks in Baltimore Gas and Electric's distribution network in 2018.

The Postal Service's vast physical and human network could provide vital public services in each of these markets while also generating additional income to sustain USPS. The GAO recognized this potential in a 2019 report, recommending that USPS explore the cost-effectiveness of installing air quality and cellular performance and coverage monitors on USPS trucks. Postal vehicles could be fitted with a host of additional monitors, gathering data on potholes, traffic and bridge conditions, snow and ice in winter storms, and natural gas leaks.

The GAO also explored the possibility of mail carriers reporting signs of blighted properties, finding that it would produce strong societal benefits by helping city governments "preemptively target and ameliorate housing blight, which can depress home values and lead to population loss." They also noted that mail carriers' daily presence in neighborhoods would "allow city governments to identify problems quickly" and the information would be reliable because it "comes from a trusted source." Postal carriers could also help gather data on fallen tree limbs, water/sewer system leaks, damaged public property, overflowing trash cans, and holes in sidewalks, unremoved snow, or other pedestrian hazards.

The GAO report built on a 2016 USPS Office of the Inspector General report which concluded that the postal network could "become a platform for the collection of valuable data needed by cities to enact their smart city plans." Other postal services around the world are already experimenting with sensors on their vehicles. Spanish post Correos is developing air quality sensors, while Finland's Posti is investigating sensors for everything from potholes to traffic management.

Putting resources into USPS to carry out such monitoring services would save governments and private corporations money and improve public safety. Essentially, the Postal Service would expand beyond delivering information generated by others to generating valuable data used by others. The benefits would be particularly valuable for those hit hardest by natural disasters, environmental pollution, and climate change — namely the elderly and disabled, low-income families, and people of color.

4. Strengthen our care infrastructure

The United States is facing a care crisis as the baby boomer generation ages and our piecemeal care infrastructure becomes ever more expensive. This puts enormous strain on families, particularly women, who are more likely than men to take on the responsibilities of caring for elderly family members. Women also make up 86 percent of the direct care workforce, with the majority being women of color.

We need a comprehensive plan to strengthen our country's care infrastructure that supports families, lifts up conditions for caregivers, and ensures that seniors can live in dignity. USPS could play a valuable role in this expanded care infrastructure by building on the existing "Carrier Alert" service. Through this limited program, the elderly and disabled can request that symbols be placed on their mailboxes to alert mail carriers to watch for signs of distress, such as a build-up of uncollected mail. Carriers report concerns to local social service agencies.

USPS should explore opportunities for a more robust check-in program, involving strong coordination with caregivers, to help the elderly and disabled live independently at lower cost than in nursing homes while reducing the strain on their families. Lessons could be learned from other countries' programs.

Japan Post has introduced a range of services to assist their rapidly aging population, including monthly half-hour visits to assess their conditions. In conjunction with IBM and Apple, they have also distributed millions of specially designed iPads to elderly people. Postal workers help program participants use the tablets to communicate with family, friends, and healthcare professionals. The Japanese program also utilizes that country's ubiquitous postal banking network to give the elderly easier access to their money without having to leave their home.

France's public post office, La Poste, operates the successful *Veiller sur mes parents* ("Watch over my parents") program in which customers pay about $20 a month for a 15-minute weekly visit with a postal employee. During this visit, postal workers ask seniors a few questions, chat with them for a while, and send a report to their family members. Approximately 6,000 people, with an average age of 82, participate in this program, which for an additional cost also offers optional daily visits and as well as a 24/7 helpline and emergency alert service. La Poste also offers elderly customers delivery of goods from local shops, prescriptions, hot meals, and even printed photos of their families, which La Poste describes as "a kind of Facebook on paper."

The British Channel Island of Jersey offers a Call&Check program through which postal workers ask clients about their welfare and what supports or services they may need. The carrier then uses a handheld device to contact a support team, which carries out requests, such as home grocery and prescription deliveries and arranging transport to hospital appointments. The success of the Jersey program prompted the United Kingdom to introduce pilot Call&Check programs via their own Royal Post in 2018.

Germany's Deutsche Post is working with the city of Bremen on a pilot project to check in on seniors, help them deposit and withdraw cash, and generally engage with them to reduce loneliness. South Korea's postal service also arranges regular check-in visits with the elderly and sends a photo once a week to clients' family members for a small fee.

5. Protect our democracy

During the pandemic, the Postal Service played a vital role in protecting Americans' most basic democratic right. Sixty-five million Americans mailed in their ballots in the 2020 general election, nearly double the number who did so in 2016. All told, postal workers delivered at least 135 million ballots to or from voters for the November election. And they did so in a timely manner, with 97.9 percent of ballots delivered from voters to election officials within three days and 99.9 percent delivered within a week.

Allowing all Americans to mail in their election ballots — even when we are not in a pandemic — would help boost democratic participation, particularly among low-income, disabled, older, and rural voters who face challenges getting to the polls. Many voting precincts are inaccessible for the disabled, while rural voters may have to deal with long drives to their polling places.

Even before the pandemic, research showed that vote by mail reforms increase participation. For example, turnout for a municipal election in Rockville, Maryland almost doubled after the city adopted vote by mail in 2019. A 2016 Pew Charitable Trusts study found that vote by mail also lowers election costs. In Colorado, this amounted to a 40 percent savings.

Nationwide vote by mail would also counter racist voter suppression. Over the past decade, half the states in the nation have placed new burdens on people's right to vote, such as voter ID requirements, that disproportionately disenfranchise people of color. In response to the 2020 election, over 165 bills restricting voting have been introduced in 33 states.

6. Narrow the digital divide

The pandemic has laid bare the staggering digital divide that persists in the world's richest country. A survey conducted just prior to the pandemic showed that as many as 42 million Americans, mostly in rural areas, do not have access to broadband service in their area. Approximately 100 million people (31 percent of U.S. households) lack high-speed internet connections, either because service is not available or they can't afford it.

Postal systems in some other nations, such as France's La Poste and Italy's Poste Italiane, provide affordable broadband services as a public service and a revenue opportunity. An October 2020 report by the U.S. Postal Service Office of Inspector General (OIG) identified similar opportunities for USPS to play a significant role in bringing broadband connectivity to unserved and underserved rural areas. Of the 31,000 USPS facilities nationwide, 2,364 are in census blocks that have only partial or no availability of broadband at speeds of 25 Mbps downstream and 3 Mbps upstream. The OIG also suggested that postal workers might be able to use their door-to-door network to help gather more accurate broadband availability data.

The Postal Service could also expand access to broadband-enabled services, for example by serving as a digital hub for Wi-Fi access, supporting public safety communications networks, and helping promote broadband-related government services. "While these efforts would not generate significant revenue and would require partnerships," according to the OIG, "they would make USPS's abundant infrastructure even more valuable to the nation and its citizens, consistent with the Postal Service's public service mission.

7. Support good jobs

The Postal Service has long been a reliable path to the middle class, particularly for Black workers, who make up nearly a quarter of the postal labor force. As of the end of September 2020, USPS employed 675,500 people, including 97,000 veterans. These decent jobs and benefits support families in every U.S. community and help lift up wages and labor conditions for employees of private sector competitors.

The total U.S. mailing industry that relies on USPS employs 7.3 million people and generates an estimated annual $1.58 trillion in sales revenue to the U.S. economy. This broader industry

includes mail production and distribution (including USPS and private carriers), as well as jobs related to goods and services advertised and delivered through the mail.

The U.S. Postal Service is a particularly critical source of good jobs and revenue in rural states. According to the [Institute for Policy Studies](#), in the 15 states with the largest share of their population in rural areas, more than 75,000 people work directly for the Postal Service — more than are employed in many other major job categories. In West Virginia, for example, USPS employs more people than the number of child care workers, police officers, medical assistants, or bank tellers in the state.

Instead of recognizing the value of middle class postal jobs to workers, their communities, and the broader economy, politicians have often scapegoated workers for the Postal Service's financial challenges. A [2018 Trump task force report](#) on the future of the Postal Service called for eliminating collective bargaining and slashing of labor costs. Prior to the Trump administration, USPS was already responding to financial pressure by squeezing its workforce, including by increasing the share of postal workers who are lower-paid, non-career employees and by closing or consolidating hundreds of mail processing facilities.

A People's Postal Agenda must defend and expand the diverse postal workforce as an opportunity for dignified, stable employment at a time of rising economic insecurity for so many Americans.

8. Protect public health

More than perhaps ever before, USPS demonstrated over the past year that it is a vital part of our country's emergency response and public health infrastructure. Postal workers have strained to meet the skyrocketing demand for delivery of medicine, cleaning supplies, and other essentials as Americans avoided brick and mortar stores for health reasons. With its nationwide network and delivery to all addresses six days a week, USPS is well-positioned to help people and communities in need.

USPS should explore whether this vast network could be deployed even more strategically in the face of future public health emergencies, for example to help with contact tracing or distribution of protective equipment.

The USPS Office of the Inspector General [has also recommended](#) a variety of ways that USPS could expand their senior and public wellness support. Recognizing that post offices are often community gathering places, particularly in small towns and remote areas, USPS could rent out unused window spaces for community wellness services or help with Social Security and food assistance.

9. Keep deliveries affordable for small businesses and consumers

USPS provides universal service at uniform and reasonable rates, delivering to every U.S. household at least six days a week, no matter where they live. The Postal Service uses revenue from more profitable services to cover much more expensive rural services. This allows it to avoid charging extra for deliveries to remote areas — unlike private carriers.

According to Institute for Policy Studies analysis, UPS and FedEx charge more for deliveries to ZIP codes that are home to approximately [70 million people](#), or approximately 21 percent of the

U.S. population. Without competition from the public Postal Service, for-profit firms would likely further hike fees and even halt deliveries altogether on less profitable rural routes.

Military veterans and their families are one group of U.S. consumers that depend heavily on USPS. Veterans receive 80 percent of their medical prescriptions through the mail. The Postal Service also offers deeply discounted shipping rates on care packages for military stationed overseas. Currently, shipping to U.S. military bases in other countries costs the same as a domestic shipment, and USPS offers cost-free packing supplies to the folks who send these care packages.

Small businesses rely on the public Postal Service's affordable rates and universal network. UPS, FedEx, and Amazon do not handle the "last mile" of a significant share of their package deliveries, particularly in rural areas where USPS is the only carrier with a door-to-door network.

10.   Support food security and local producers

A hundred years ago, farmers depended on the U.S. mail to ship farm fresh eggs to urban markets. Since 1918, farmers have also depended on the Post Office to deliver baby chicks from hatcheries, a service that continues today. With a history of handling perishable products like eggs and baby chicks, the Postal Service could expand into delivering fresh foods from farms to residents interested in supporting local agriculture. Under a World Wildlife Fund proposal, USPS drivers would pick up boxes of locally and seasonably available produce from farms along their usual routes and deliver them right to people's front doors or to designated drop-off locations.

The USPS could also explore opportunities for expanding into grocery delivery. The Postal Service conducted a successful pilot project in 2014, but it was not expanded. During the pandemic, consumer demand for online grocery ordering and deliveries has expanded enormously and many urban residents have become accustomed to it. But these privately operated delivery services aren't always available in low-income neighborhoods or rural communities. USPS grocery delivery — especially to seniors with limited ability to drive an hour to their nearest grocery store — would both be a boon for the wellbeing of the elderly and other populations and also contribute to the financial well-being of USPS.

USPS could also partner with local food banks that would drop food boxes at local post offices for "last mile" delivery to home-bound people in need of food. Post office parking lots could be rented during less utilized periods for farmers' markets, benefiting the community with healthier food options while also generating additional USPS revenue.

Conclusion

This People's Postal Agenda focuses on building and sustaining the Postal Service through innovations that address the pressing needs of our time.

The United States would be a very different country today if detractors from times past had carried the day and blocked free rural delivery for cost reasons, or airmail because of the risks of a new technology, or package delivery because of supposed mission creep.

Like our ancestors before us, we must continue to support this vital public agency as it opens up new possibilities for the 21st Century.

About this paper

This initial draft of a "People's Postal Agenda" is designed to spark discussion within the Grand Alliance to Save Our Public Postal Service. It is a "living" document that will be further developed based on input from Alliance members and other USPS stakeholders.

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Through this alliance, more than 80 national organizations have joined forces with the American Postal Workers Union to protect and enhance vibrant public postal services now — and for many generations to come.