

# Congress of the United States

Washington, DC 20510

April 19, 2023

The Honorable Louis DeJoy  
Postmaster General  
United States Postal Service  
475 L' Enfant Plaza S.W.  
Washington, D.C. 20260

The Honorable Tammy Whitcomb Hull  
Inspector General  
United States Postal Service  
475 L' Enfant Plaza S.W.  
Washington, D.C. 20260

Dear Postmaster General DeJoy and Inspector General Whitcomb Hull,

We write to request that the United States Postal Service Office of Inspector General (“USPS OIG”) investigate potential mismanagement by postal managers and other decision-makers within USPS that endangered the lives of letter carriers during the onset of Winter Storm Elliott in Western New York. We ask that in addition to an investigation by the OIG, that USPS also work with the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (“OSHA”) to develop, implement, and update any procedures for protecting the postal workforce in severe winter weather events.

By December 23, 2022, it was clear that Winter Storm Elliott would become a “once in a generation” winter storm, with plummeting temperatures, heavy snowfall, and wind chills that posed extreme danger to New Yorkers and other Americans in the Northeastern and Central United States.<sup>1</sup> However, we are concerned that management at a number of postal facilities in western New York ignored warnings about the storm and wasted precious hours deliberating with colleagues in Albany and Pittsburgh – hundreds of miles from the center of the storm -- that would have instead allowed mail carriers to return home and prepare themselves and their loved ones. According to impacted workers, the weather continued to deteriorate, mail carriers were denied the ability to leave their stations and return home, with some employees being told that unless they took out of their Annual Leave to depart, that they would be considered “AWOL” by management.

Although the blizzard arrived at 8:39 AM local time and a county driving ban had been issued at 9:30 AM, Postal Service managers did not instruct employees to return home until the afternoon.<sup>2</sup> By then, carriers were left to navigate a storm that would result in the tragic deaths of 47 people. Our offices are also aware of reports suggesting that certain managers were aware that USPS carriers were exempt from the county driving ban, which may have been used as leverage in order to get employees to continue working. It is especially alarming for us to learn of reports that when employees did try to shelter at their offices, managers allegedly threatened to call the police and remove them.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://twitter.com/NWSBUFFALO/status/1605542943879827458?s=20>

<sup>2</sup> [https://buffalonews.com/news/local/govt-and-politics/postal-service-managers-accused-of-endangering-workers-during-buffalo-blizzard/article\\_5b74c1a4-9e50-11ed-9da7-0f0b146c0bd4.html](https://buffalonews.com/news/local/govt-and-politics/postal-service-managers-accused-of-endangering-workers-during-buffalo-blizzard/article_5b74c1a4-9e50-11ed-9da7-0f0b146c0bd4.html)

If not for our brave first responders, the strength of the local community, and luck, many of these carriers may not have survived. One employee noted that he was unable to drive away from his facility in Williamsville, and instead spent two nights at his facility until he was able to leave on Christmas Day. Another carrier's infant son who was breastfeeding had to go two days without his mother. Another worker who was eight months pregnant was delayed until nearly 4:00 PM on the 23rd, became immobilized attempting to drive home due to the blizzard, and had to be recovered by volunteer firefighters. For another carrier, her vehicle careened into a ditch, only to be rescued by a nearby resident, who took her to safety and allowed her to stay with his family.

The allegations of delays and poor decision-making that risked the lives of employees during such an extreme weather event is highly alarming. In addition to the development of an extreme winter weather safety plan, we also ask that USPS respond to the following questions:

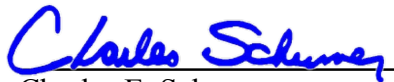
1. Will employees who were stranded or immobilized due to the extreme weather be fully compensated? Have they been offered psychological counseling?
2. What is the chain of command and decision-making process for releasing employees back to their homes in extreme weather scenarios?
3. Weather outlets and federal agencies were reporting for days ahead of Winter Storm Elliott that it would be a "once in a generation" winter storm. Did managers and their superiors develop a contingency or safety plan in advance of the storm?
4. Have managers who allegedly held employees until the afternoon on the 23<sup>rd</sup> and threatened to call law enforcement on sheltering workers faced any disciplinary action? If not, is there currently an ongoing investigation?
5. Under what scenarios, if at all, are managers and other USPS officials able to delegate the authority to send employees home to leaders working on-site?

Thank you for considering these questions. We look forward to your prompt response.

Sincerely,



Kirsten Gillibrand  
United States Senator



Charles E. Schumer  
United States Senator



Brian Higgins  
Member of Congress

CC: The Honorable Douglas L. Parker  
Assistant Secretary of Labor for Occupational Safety and Health  
Occupational Safety and Health Administration