Case: U.S. Postal Service and Workplace Violence

Roy Betts, media relations representative for the U.S. Postal Service, stands in the little square-shaped cubicle that is his office and disseminates information about the new electricity-powered Postal Service trucks. If his cube had been situated just a bit differently, he could see a magnificent view of Washington, DC, from the office windows of the headquarters building nicknamed the Pink Palace, but he is not concerned with views just now.

In addition to the outgoing news on trucks, he is thinking about a story already in the local papers about a gunman on a rampage in San Francisco. “My first thought when I heard about it,” he says, “was ‘I hope he’s not a postal employee.’ But even though he’s not, I guarantee you I will get at least one phone call from the news media about the incident.”

Many Postal Service employees are experts on violence, particularly workplace violence. Between 1983 and 1993, there were 10 incidents of violence in which postal employees or former postal employees murdered 34 people, most at a work site.

The most notorious incident staff members simply called “Edmond.” Part-time letter carrier Patrick Sherrill, about to be terminated from the Edmond, Oklahoma, Post Office, brandished a gun and shot 14 people. When it was over, all of them were dead, and Sherrill killed himself. It was August 20, 1986. “Edmond,” said Betts, “seemed to be a bizarre, rare incident. I believe institutions, like individuals, go through a period of denial before reality sets in. The Postal Service was in denial after Edmond, but Royal Oak shocked us into reality.”

The Royal Oak incident happened on November 14, 1991, when postal employee Thomas McIlvane killed four people in the Royal Oak, Michigan, Post Office, injured eight others, and killed himself (see Fig. 8.4).
“Once the trigger is pulled, you’ve lost; the battle is over,” Betts said. “You go through post trauma and then do what you can to prevent another incident.” “You can’t erase the incident from people’s minds or delete words from the media. The media are very interested whenever there’s an incident of violence.” (Examples of U.S. Postal Service communications with employees and the media are shown in Figs. 8.5 and 8.6.)

Following the Royal Oak incident, the U.S. Postal Service issued its Joint Statement on Violence and Behavior in the Workplace to postal employees (see Fig. 8.7). It was a response, not only of Postal Service management, but also of the unions and the management associations—all working together to prevent further tragedy.

In the early 1990s, departments reported to then-Postmaster General Marvin Runyon. Each department somehow dealt with the issue of preventing workplace violence. Betts reported to Frank Brennan, the manager of media relations, who reported to corporate relations vice president Larry Speakes (yes, the same Larry Speakes of the Reagan administration), who reported to Runyon (see Fig. 8.8). Among its other duties, the media relations department was faced with getting information to the media and to employees about violence-prevention programs. It was also instrumental in keeping the media away from grieving employees, families, and eyewitnesses to incidents of violence.
Violent tendencies targeted
Postal chief orders screening, replaces Royal Oak director

by Wylie Gibson and Mike Bizzold
FREE PRESS STAFF WRITERS

In the wake of a fired worker's rampage that left four employees of the Royal Oak post office dead, federal officials on Friday ordered a sweeping review to pinpoint current and former employees with violent tendencies.

The toll from the Thursday shootings reached five Friday as postal supervisor Rose Marie Proos, 33, and the gunman, 31-year-old Thomas McIlvane of Oak Park, died at William Beaumont Hospital in Royal Oak. Five other people remained hospitalized.

McIlvane's shooting spree was the fifth such assault at a post office in the last six years. His attack, sparked by his firing for swearing at a supervisor, came just over a month after four people were killed in Ridgewood, N.J. by a fired postal employee.

At a news conference in Birmingham, U.S. Postmaster General Anthony Frank said the five shootings formed no pattern. Nevertheless, he said, records of nearly 750,000 current postal employees, along with those of former employees, will be examined.

In addition, the Postal Service will review its hiring process and begin contacting law enforcement and military agencies about potential employees.

Local police and postal inspectors had investigated allegations of threatening behavior by McIlvane, who had a history of aggressive behavior while a marine, officials said.

Frank also has asked for an examination of the circumstances that might lead up to such violence, and directed postal officials to contact private firms that have had similar tragedies.

"Together, we begin the long process of healing. And we are resolved to do all that we can to assure that senseless carnage never again strikes our postal family," he said.

Figure 8.4. A news story in the Detroit Free Press, November 16, 1991, about a gunman's shooting rampage at a U.S. Postal Service facility in Royal Oak, Michigan. Reprinted with permission of the Detroit Free Press.
10 p.m. (EDT) postal shootings update

Three postal employees were killed and three others wounded today in two separate shooting incidents at facilities in Dearborn, Michigan, and Dana Point, California. Crisis response professionals are on the scene in both locations providing counseling and support for all employees and their families.

At approximately 9 a.m., employee Lawrence Jaison, 45, allegedly entered the main floor of the Dearborn, MI, Vehicle Maintenance Facility (VMF) and opened fire on fellow employees with two small-caliber handguns, killing automotive mechanic Gary Montes and wounding two others before taking his own life.

VMF employee Sandra Brandstatter was critically wounded with gunshot wounds to the head and back while VMF Manager Bruce Plumb is in serious condition after being shot in the back. Another VMF employee, Glen Gay, suffered an injured hip in a fall while fleeing the facility and also reported chest pains. All three were admitted to Oakwood Community Hospital.

Jaison, a 26-year postal veteran, had filed an EEO complaint alleging discrimination on the basis of sex in the selection of Brandstatter for a position he had applied for at the VMF. The final decision denying Jaison's EEO claim was issued on April 19, 1993.

Almost four hours after the first incident, former postal employee Mark Richard Hibun entered a rear door of the Dana Point, CA, Post Office. He allegedly shot and killed letter carrier Charles Barbaggio and wounded a clerk, who was grazed in the head by a bullet. The clerk was treated and released.

Hibun, who was fired last September and had been arrested previously for assault, then went to the postmaster's office and fired a shot through the door, failing to wound the postmaster. After shooting at, and missing, a private citizen outside the building, Hibun escaped and still is being sought by Orange County Sheriffs. A search of Hibun's mother's home following the shootings led to the discovery of his mother and her dog, both dead. The stabbing of Hibun's mother occurred approximately one hour before the post office shootings.

United States Postal Service
Ann Wright, manager of employee health and services, collaborated with others to set up the national strategy for violence prevention.

Dave Cybulski, manager of management association relations, served as a liaison with four principal unions of postal workers and three management associations. Workplace violence became a point of unusual accord between the labor associations and the Postal Service. “We have very collegial relations with the unions on this issue,” said Cybulski.
Employee Relations Specialist Bradley Johnson was hired by Suzanne Henry, former vice president of employee relations, to coordinate all the various violence prevention efforts. He was responsible for the development and implementation of the Postal Service’s corporate strategy on prevention programs for workplace violence. Johnson developed a leadership awareness program on workplace violence prevention for 40,000 supervisors, managers, postmasters, and local union officials. Regarding the program, Johnson said, “The issue is too massive and the credibility of the program too important for me to do it alone. So, I consulted with several of the nation’s leading clinical psychologists. These
consultations provided me with the strategic direction and foundation for the development of this program.”

Ask any one of them about the violence and you will be told that the incidents, although tragic, are not as common as they seemed. The U.S. Postal Service is the largest civilian employer in the United States (at times, General Motors is larger), with 730,000 employees. With that many employees, problems develop, conflicts occur, and violence can happen.

The media, even today, still seem especially interested in incidents that take place in post offices. The crimes committed by postal workers make much greater food for the news-hungry reporter than crimes committed against postal workers. Mail carriers are mugged, shot, stabbed, and bitten by dogs, but rarely do these incidents make news.

At the same time, crimes committed at non-postal work sites may be unreported, underreported, or reported as something other than workplace violence by the media. Cybulski noted one such tragedy in which an irate airlines employee
walked onto a plane, shot his supervisor, and caused a fatal crash. The story was reported as a plane crash, but the incident was also an act of workplace violence.

Then-Postmaster Runyon maintained that, despite the news media’s concentration on postal issues, the U.S. Postal Service had a lower rate of violent worker death than industry in general (Fields, 1993). Betts said the staff thinks of the Postal Service as a family operation despite its large number of employees. He said:

At some point in time, somebody in every family works for the post office. Most of the postal workers are mail-handlers—sorters, clerks, carriers, truck drivers—in all the various facilities around the country. As we talk, they are collecting and delivering the mail.

When we go home, the night shift is going to work. Mail approximating 650 million pieces a day [177 billion in 1993] is being dumped on conveyer belts, sorted, and sent to its destination the next day. These people are valuable to us. The purpose of this organization is to get the mail out, and they do it.

To protect these valuable employees, Runyon and other Postal Service officials first admitted that workplace violence was a problem. Violence in the workplace was increasing. The Bureau of Labor Statistics revealed that more than 1,000 U.S. workers were murdered at work in 1992, and these were not just postal workers. Most were victims of highway crashes and robberies, but the prevailing publicity centered on the U.S. Postal Service. The staff saw the Postal Service as a mirror of society; hence, the problems of American society were also the problems of the U.S. Postal Service. Cybulski said he input four keywords into the Nexus computer program: employee, violence, homicide, and workplace. “The printer kept going and going and going. It’s what’s going on in society,” he said.

“Violence is a part of everyday life,” said Betts. “Either you are victimized by violence or you recognize it for what it is and develop strategies to cope with it.”
To prevent the growth of violence, the U.S. Postal Service developed a six-part national strategy for violence prevention.

**Violence Prevention Strategy**

The prevention strategy was developed by a national committee consisting of postal management, union officials, and management associations. Rank-and-file employees were also consulted through focus groups to determine their ideas on the issue. The result is a violence-prevention strategy with these six sections:

- Selection
- Security
- Policy
- Climate
- Employee support
- Separation.

**Selection**

The U.S. Postal Service’s hiring procedure is designed to select the right person for the right job. To that end, one outside firm is contracted to do thorough background checks of all job applicants. The firm has access to national databases to investigate job applicants’ criminal and driving histories, credit records, and physical and mental health backgrounds.

Ann Wright, a Postal Service manager who has held several high-level managerial positions, said, “Because we have a unique population in that we’re across the entire country and we have mobile people, it’s been difficult for personnel to do thorough checks on the local level.” Wright noted that the outside firm frees up Postal Service employees to do other screening processes, such as getting references from former employers (Anfuso, 1994, p. 70).
Competency examinations are also used in the new hiring procedure. However, the Postal Service has declined to use behavioral tests in the screening process. Management looked into the possibility and could not identify a test that was effective for its purposes. Critics of behavioral tests say they invade privacy and may not be a predictor of violent behavior.

**Security**

Wright said that, “to protect people from homicide and other violence, a certain amount of security is necessary.”

Security procedures vary at U.S. Postal Service facilities, depending on their size. There are 38,000 such facilities nationwide. Some have a single employee; others have as many as 4,000 employees and operate on a 24-hour schedule. The Postal Inspection Service, the law enforcement department of the U.S. Postal Service, coordinate security measures with the management at each facility.

Some facilities have security guards. Some require employee badges for admittance to the premises. Some have surveillance cameras. There are also awareness programs in place, with guidelines on how to report incidents of workplace violence.

**Policy**

A policy of “no incident of violence,” not even a minor incident, is promoted at Postal Service locations. All such incidents are to be reported. No weapons are permitted on Postal Service premises, including in parking lots. There are to be no threats of any kind and no pushing, cursing, yelling, or other aggressive behavior.

“We’re trying to promote a clear, direct, absolute, and well-known policy related to violence,” Wright said. She also said that seemingly small incidents are forbidden because they can escalate into something major.

“An employee’s chances of being terminated for bearing firearms are greater than ever before,” said Betts. “We cannot afford the risk.”

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Climate
Positive changes in the culture of each Postal Service facility are aimed at ensuring an environment conducive to safe, productive work. Managers and supervisors participate in a series of training sessions designed to make them knowledgeable about conflict resolution, positive reinforcement, and employee empowerment.

The employee unions are also working with the Postal Service to improve the process of addressing workers’ grievances. Both union and Postal Service officials agree that alleviation of stress is the key factor in improving the relationship between employees and management.

The American Postal Workers Union (APWU) represents 366,000 postal employees, who join voluntarily. In 1994, Tom Fahey, APWU communications director of the union, noted that, “the relationship between labor and management of the Postal Service has not been good at all, to put it mildly” (Browning, 1994, p. 24). Communications publications emanating from Fahey’s office were concerned with employees’ complaints about a militaristic management style that they felt contributed significantly to the violence.

Henry claimed progress had been made, although she admitted that the complaints and the stress had not been totally eliminated. “We’re doing a lot of things jointly with our unions that wouldn’t have been possible before,” she said (Browning, 1994, p. 24).

The Postal Service issues an annual employee-opinion survey to measure employee satisfaction and promote positive interaction between employees and managers. In the 1994 survey, half a million employees participated and expressed that they had better authority to do their jobs, that they were kept more informed on important matters, that union and management worked better together, and that the quality of service had improved. They were generally happy with their salaries and job security, and they were enjoying their work.
However, they were concerned that improvements be made in job safety, that the pace be quickened in changing the work culture and in preventing problems such as sexual harassment. As an example of changes resulting from the survey, one third of performance compensation for managers is now based on employee satisfaction.

Employee Support

Founded in 1986, the Employee Assistance Program (EAP) was originally for the recovery of alcoholics. Dr. John Kurutz is manager of the EAP, which is a short-term counseling and referral source that helps employees overcome any problem dealing with work or personal issues that can cause stress and physical, mental, or emotional duress.

The EAP has counseled more than 600 employees. Also, improvements have been made in teaching employees how to use the EAP. All Postal Service employees participate in some kind of orientation program that includes an explanation of the EAP.

Two 24-hour hotlines and toll-free numbers were installed for employee use in reporting threats or other concerns to headquarters. One line connects to the U.S. Postal Inspection Service and is for the reporting of threats or other illegal activity. The second line takes calls reporting almost anything employees want to vent. Wright said all calls are taken seriously. According to Betts:

Employees know about the hotlines. A worker can talk too loud and another will call the hotline. This can be an early sign of a crucial problem. We try to do this without a witch-hunt atmosphere. But we use common sense in defining acceptable and unacceptable behavior. We do not ignore any calls. Sometimes people just call with personal problems. And that’s okay. If a caller contacts us and needs some sort of counseling, then counseling is available on that phone line.
The U.S. Postal Inspection Service investigates threats from both hotlines. During the first year of operation, the hotline logged 1,790 calls. Paul Griffo, national spokesperson for the Postal Inspection Service, said, “If you are threatening others or if you are exhibiting threatening behavior, it’s going to be followed up on right away” (Browning, 1994, p. 23).

In certain regions of the Postal Service, crisis intervention teams have been organized to address threats and behavior believed to be potentially violent. Jim Merrill, a human resources executive with the Pacific Area, heads such a team in California. Each district creates its own crisis intervention team, made up of key employees as well as others from outside sources. “The teams provide an organized way of addressing potentially dangerous situations so that we can have control and respond appropriately,” said Merrill (Anfuso, 1994, p. 76).

Merrill recalled an incident in which a former employee wrote a threatening letter and sent it via computer to the Antioch, California, Post Office. The letter read in part, “I have post-traumatic stress disorder. I haven’t been properly treated; I’m enraged and I wake up at night thinking that I want to kill the postmaster” (Anfuso, 1994, p. 76). The crisis intervention team went into action. The former employee hired an attorney to deal with the issue, so the team met with the attorney. A physician on the team met with the former employee’s therapist. A permanent restraining order was filed against the former employee. Additional security was added, and the postmaster was temporarily moved to a different site.

“You don’t have control of that person [the former employee] because he’s outside your work force,” said Merrill, “but through these efforts we were able to put him on notice, determine that he wasn’t dangerous, that he was just blowing off steam, and defuse the situation” (Anfuso, 1994, p. 76).

Also, in California, 5,000 postal managers were trained in how to report threats and how to recognize the warnings of violence.
Separation

“We’re trying to make the point with our managers and supervisors that firing people doesn’t necessarily solve the problem,” said Wright. “Quite a few of our most violent incidents have been [committed by] terminated employees who come back and shoot people” (Anfuso, 1994, p. 69).

An employee who places all hope in his or her job is one type of worker at risk for violence. This employee, if terminated after many years on the job, suddenly realizes loyalty is a myth, or, at best, a one-way street.

Nevertheless, termination is sometimes necessary, so the Postal Service has created policies and procedures for terminating employees effectively and for making assessments of potentially violent consequences.

The Dearborn Prevention Program

In addition to the various programs emanating from the U.S. Postal Service headquarters, individual postal facilities may have their own programs. Following the May 1993 shooting at the Dearborn, Michigan, Post Office, the staff adopted the following violence prevention program:

1. A suggestion box was installed in each of four area post offices to promote employee feedback.
2. Two work teams were formed: a communications committee and a leadership committee. Each consists of 8 to 10 workers, a union representative, and a manager. The work teams discuss suggestions made by employees and make recommendations to the joint labor–management committee.
3. An employee picnic helps raise funds for victims of the shooting incident. The city police and firefighters are invited to attend.
4. An employee-of-the-month program rewards employees with engraved plaques, gift certificates for movies and dinner, and special employee parking places.
Communications
Without question, employees are the target public for the Postal Service’s violence prevention program. How do policies and programs developed at headquarters in Washington, DC, get communicated to nearly three-quarters of a million employees?

According to Betts, there is competition for the attention of employees on the issue of workplace violence. There are Postal Service communications, along with communications from unions, the media, and peers. “Each may have a different slant but the messages are the same,” Betts said. “It would be naïve to expect anything different. Our best bet is to communicate early, often, and accurately. Credibility is all we have.”

Various newsletters and bulletins are circulated nationwide, including Postal Life, a national newspaper for postal employees. Newsbreaks are posted on bulletin boards in postal facilities nationwide. Video Focus is a video that is issued monthly, describing new policy decisions. There are television monitors in rooms where employees take breaks and have meals. The supervisors ensure that everyone has the opportunity to view the videos.

Special “Town Hall” meetings are held once every 3 or 4 months at selected locations. Former Postmaster General Runyon headed a 2-hour session attended by about 250 employees. At these meetings, issues pertinent to employees are discussed, and questions are answered by the postmaster general. Videotapes of each session are distributed to facilities throughout the country.

One-on-one meetings with supervisors are also considered important, as are group meetings with supervisors.

The unions have made it possible to segment the employee public further. Cybulski says all the unions and management associations have newsletters and bulletin board messages widely read by their particular workers. The APWU
communicates with approximately 330,000 window clerks and mail processors. The National Association of Letter Carriers communicates with 300,000 people who deliver mail. The Mail Handlers Union communicates with 51,000 workers who do heavy lifting, loading, and unloading of mail. The National Rural Letter Carriers Association communicates with 60,000 workers in rural areas—carriers who deliver to street boxes.

According to Cybulski, management associations also are a source of communications with their members. The three associations are the National Association of Postal Supervisors, the National Association of Postmasters of the United States, and the National League of Postmasters of the United States. Cybulski said that the Postal Service formed a leadership team in April 1993:

Every officer of the Postal Service and the presidents of the unions and management associations meet for a full day, twice a month. There are no substitutes for the presidents, because we need the person with authority to make commitments and decisions. Workplace violence is a subject all members of the team believe is crucial, and participants take information and decisions back to their members.

Other Efforts
In December 1993, the U.S. Postal Service sponsored a symposium on workplace violence in Washington, DC. It was attended by academic and professional experts on the subject, in addition to corporate and government executives.

There is also a National Committee on Workplace Behavior headed by Joseph Mahon, vice president of labor relations.

The Postal Service’s communications program got a boost when the Centers for Disease Control (CDC), in August 1994, published statistics that said, despite extensive media coverage to the contrary, neither the Postal Service nor postal occupations are among the groups at increased risk for work-related homicide. The report further found that “the occupational fatality rate for U.S. Postal
Service workers is approximately 2.5 times lower than that for all workers combined.” The CDC report went on to say, “Although the occupational homicide rate for the Postal Service is similar to the national rate for all industries, co-workers appear to be disproportionately responsible for homicides that occur in the Postal Service” (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 1994, p. 594).

The CDC statements were good news and no news, respectively, to Betts and the rest of the headquarters staff. “We were aware that people from employee relations had been working with the CDC on the study,” said Betts. “The results confirmed what we were saying all along.” When released to the media, the information was more credible to the public coming from the CDC than from the Postal Service. If the Postal Service had released the information, it could have been accused of attempting to improve its image with questionable data. The CDC, however, had nothing to gain from the release of the information.

The CDC information was reported on the Associated Press wire and appeared in positive stories by many newspapers, including the St. Louis Post-Dispatch (August 21, 1994), Washington Times, the Denver Rocky Mountain News, Commercial Appeal (Memphis), Houston Post, Newsday (New York), Orange County Register, Sacramento Bee, Newark Star Ledger, Denver Post, and Seattle Post-Intelligencer (see Fig. 8.9).

An employer does not cause violence. Circumstances on a job can, however, contribute to stress levels, which cause violence. The Postal Service is looking for solutions and, by these efforts, it is making significant contributions to corporate America. Betts says of the Postal Service, “We are coming of age. We are an organization which tries to define and redefine our mission, our purpose. We are looking for new innovative ways of handling mail, but 80 cents of every dollar in our budget is spent for labor. Our operations remain labor-intensive.”
In the middle of these words, Betts got a phone call from a California reporter asking about the possibility of doing a series of articles on violence and wanted suggestions and cooperation from Betts. “See what I told you,” Betts responded after the call. “I knew that the incident in San Francisco would cause some media connection to us. I knew it!”

Two murders occurred at Postal Service locations in the late 1990s. In 1997, in a Milwaukee post office, a worker shot and wounded a supervisor and killed another employee before killing himself. In the Dallas area, in 1998, a postal clerk...
was fatally shot by a letter carrier. In January 2006, seven people were killed in a Postal Service office in Goleta, California.

In October 1998, Postmaster General William J. Henderson formed the U.S. Postal Service Commission on a Safe and Secure Workplace. Chaired by Joseph A. Califano, Jr., former secretary of the U.S. Department of Health, Education and Welfare, the six-person independent commission investigated and analyzed workplace violence within the Postal Service. It gave special attention to several factors, including work-related stress, substance abuse, and the workplace environment.

At the same time the commission was formed in 1998, Suzanne Milton was hired in the newly created position of manager of workplace environment improvement (part of the Human Resources Department). Among her tasks were improving the employee awareness program and generally bringing a better focus to the Postal Service’s many other programs. “We are also trying,” she said, “to concentrate on the positive, ignoring the unfortunate slang slogan, ‘going postal.’ We know that people think positively of their letter carriers and the people they see at their local post offices, so we build on that positive feeling.”

Betts said, “The whole idea of ‘going postal’ is a myth. Going postal means delivering billions of cards, letters, and packages on time. That’s going postal.”

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