

**DOCUMENT RESUME**

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Report to Rep. Ted Weiss; by Allen R. Voss, Director, General Government Div.

Contact: General Government Div.

Budget Function: General Government: Other General Government (806).

Organization Concerned: Postal Service.

Congressional Relevance: Rep. Ted Weiss.

In response to a congressional inquiry, the quality of mail delivery service and the management of customer services at post offices in New York City were reviewed. The delivery performance for mail originating in Manhattan and the Bronx was below the Postal Service's goal of 95% ontime delivery for overnight, 2-day, and 3-day areas, but mail destined for Manhattan delivery from overnight, 2-day, and 3-day areas met or exceeded the Service's goals. Mail destined for Bronx delivery from overnight areas exceeded the goals also. Statistics for fiscal year 1977 showed that 6.4% (about 48 million pieces) of first-class stamped mail was delivered late. Probably the most quantifiable cause for late mail delivery is mis-sent mail. Other causes of late mail delivery include: transportation delays, equipment breakdowns, power failures, bad weather, and unusually high volume. About 14,500 consumer complaint cards were filed in fiscal year 1977 pertaining to Manhattan postal operations. These complaints involved late delivery, mail delivered to the wrong address, properly addressed mail returned as nondeliverable, and foul-ups in change-of-address orders. Customer retailing services in Manhattan and Bronx post offices are generally adequate. Independent observations showed that 44% of the patrons were served within one minute and that 75% were served in three and one-half minutes or less. All postal facilities in the district seemed to have adequate directories for guiding postal patrons to the type of service desired. (RRS)



UNITED STATES GENERAL ACCOUNTING OFFICE

WASHINGTON, D.C. 20548

GENERAL GOVERNMENT  
DIVISION

B-114874

The Honorable Ted Weiss  
House of Representatives

DECEMBER 12, 1978

Dear Mr. Weiss:

In response to your August 11, 1977, request, we have reviewed the quality of mail delivery service and the management of customer services at post offices throughout your district.

Generally, we found that mail delivery service in Manhattan and the Bronx has been inconsistent. The Postal Service strives for consistent delivery service, claiming 95 percent ontime delivery as its goal. Although the Service has been able to meet its goal for much of the mail to be delivered in Manhattan and the Bronx, it has been unable to meet it for mail originating there. With one exception, however, delivery performance levels in Manhattan and the Bronx compared favorably with those of the Northeast Region and the Nation.

Even if all delivery performance goals had been met in Manhattan and the Bronx many millions of pieces of mail would be delivered late each year. Actual figures for fiscal year 1977 show that 6.4 percent--or about 48 million pieces--was delivered late.

Our independent observations of waiting times for window services in the 17 post offices in the 20th Congressional District showed 44 percent of the patrons were served in 1 minute or less and that 75 percent were served in 3-1/2 minutes or less. Waiting more than 3-1/2 minutes may not disturb some patrons, but the Postal Service has determined that many patrons may become agitated if required to wait more than 3-1/2 minutes.

GGD-79-21  
(22307)

While there can be instances of patrons waiting in lines longer than 3-1/2 minutes in every post office in the 20th Congressional District, it seemed to be a problem in only four post offices--Radio City, Cathedral, Hamilton Grange, and Planetarium. The longer average waiting times in these offices indicate that the hours and/or number of windows open were not always sufficient to accommodate the postal patrons within a reasonable period of time. As a result of our findings the New York Post Office officials agreed to improve window service where feasible.

Our review was conducted primarily at the Postal Service's District Office in New York City and at various postal facilities situated within the New York City District. We also obtained information from the Northeast Region Office, as well as from the U.S. Postal Service Headquarters, Washington, D.C.

Our findings are discussed in detail in the following sections.

#### BACKGROUND

The New York City District is part of the Postal Service's Northeast Region which, in addition to New York City, has responsibility for postal operations in the six New England States, eastern New York State, New Jersey, Puerto Rico, and the Virgin Islands. The New York City District is responsible for postal operations in the boroughs of Manhattan, the Bronx, Staten Island, and Brooklyn.

The New York City Post Office, which is responsible for all Manhattan postal operations, is the largest in the Nation, employing about 26,000 people and serving about 2.6 million people. During fiscal year 1977 the New York City Post Office processed about 4.4 billion pieces of mail and had an operating budget of about \$491 million; the Bronx Post Office processed about 455 million pieces of mail and had operating expenses of \$56 million.

The 20th Congressional District includes 17 New York post offices--15 in Manhattan and 2 in the Bronx. These offices are:

Manhattan

Ansonia Station	Midtown Station
Audubon Station	Old Chelsea Station
Cathedral Station	Planetarium Station
Fort George Station	Radio City Station
General Post Office	Times Square Station
Hamilton Grange Station	Village Station
Inwood Station	Washington Bridge Station
Manhattanville Station	

Bronx

Kingsbridge Station	Riverdale Station
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First-class mail delivery standards

The Service has established the following standards for delivery of first-class mail:

- 1 day (overnight) within designated areas (generally within sectional center areas and among adjoining sectional center areas),
- 2 days for mail within a 600-mile radius, and
- 3 days for all other first-class mail.

These standards apply to all first-class mail, including stamped, metered, and government mail, which has the proper address and ZIP Code and which is posted by the last mail pickup time--generally 5 p.m. The Service's goal is to deliver 95 percent of the first-class mail within these standards.

The Service's Origin-Destination Information System (ODIS) provides a reliable measure of first-class mail delivery performance. <sup>1</sup>/ ODIS collects and analyzes statistics showing whether the Service is achieving its goals. Under this system, delivery time is measured from the date mail is postmarked to the date it reaches the last delivery unit before being placed in the addressee's mailbox. ODIS does not recognize delays that can occur before postmarking or in delivery.

1/We verified the accuracy and reliability of ODIS in our report to the Congress entitled "System for Measuring Mail Delivery Performance--Its Accuracy and Limits."

New York City and Bronx  
delivery commitments

New York City and the Bronx post offices have essentially the same delivery commitments for all first-class mail posted by 5 p.m. They are committed to overnight delivery of first-class mail to all of New York City; Long Island; several northern counties just outside New York City, such as Westchester and Monticello; northeastern New Jersey; and Stamford, Connecticut. In addition, they are committed to overnight delivery to several major distant cities, including Albany, Boston, Chicago, Detroit, Los Angeles, and San Francisco. Both post offices are committed to 2-day delivery to 36 States, including some as far away as Arizona, Colorado, Georgia, Michigan, and Washington.

QUALITY OF MAIL SERVICE  
IN MANHATTAN  
AND THE BRONX

ODIS statistics for the period October 9, 1976, to June 16, 1978, show that delivery performance for mail originating in Manhattan and the Bronx was below the Service's goal of 95 percent ontime delivery for overnight, 2-day, and 3-day areas. However, mail destined for Manhattan delivery from overnight, 2-day, and 3-day areas met or exceeded the Service's goal; mail destined for Bronx delivery from overnight areas also exceeded the goal. With one exception, the mail delivery performance levels for Manhattan and the Bronx compared favorably to those of the Service's Northeast Region and the Nation.

Even with the relatively high delivery performance levels in Manhattan and the Bronx, about 48 million of the 753 million pieces of stamped first-class mail were delivered late in fiscal year 1977. Late delivery problems--ranging from mail sent to the wrong destination to transportation foul-ups--usually related to mail processing.

Mail originating in Manhattan and the  
Bronx is below Service delivery goals

ODIS statistics for mail originating in Manhattan and the Bronx show that delivery performance was below the Service's goal for fiscal year 1977 and the first three quarters of fiscal year 1978. As shown in the following table, however, delivery performance for Manhattan and the Bronx compared favorably to regional and national averages, except in the area of Manhattan overnight delivery.

Percent of mail delivered on time

	<u>Manhattan</u>	<u>Bronx</u>	<u>Region</u>	<u>Nation</u>
Overnight	89	93	91	94
2-day	88	90	88	89
3-day	91	92	91	90

According to postal officials, the primary reason for substandard performance in overnight deliveries was the consistently slow delivery of mail to Newark, New Jersey; Westchester, New York; Mineola, Long Island; and Hicksville, New York. These four offices together accounted for 15 percent of New York's overnight mail. The officials said that slow delivery at these offices had a substantial impact on ODIS statistics for Manhattan and the Bronx. A Northeast Region official said that the region is working with the four post offices to improve service.

Combined delivery performance statistics for the Manhattan and Bronx post offices are not instructive for many geographic locations where service may be better or worse than the composite average. For example, during the last quarter of fiscal year 1977, the New York City Post Office attained 92 percent ontime delivery for first-class stamped mail within all overnight areas. Mail delivered just within the Manhattan area attained a 95 percent ontime record. Mail to be delivered overnight to Hackensack, New Jersey, however--just across the Hudson River--attained only 72 percent ontime delivery. Yet because of the relatively small amount of mail from New York to Hackensack, poor delivery is not made evident by the Service's overall statistics.

Mail destined to be delivered in  
Manhattan and the Bronx generally  
met or exceeded Service goals

Mail destined for Manhattan delivery from overnight, 2-day, and 3-day areas met or exceeded the Service's goal; mail destined for Bronx delivery from overnight areas also exceeded the goal. Delivery performance levels for Manhattan and the Bronx exceeded both regional and national levels, as shown in the following table.

Percent of mail delivered on time

	<u>Manhattan</u>	<u>Bronx</u>	<u>Region</u>	<u>Nation</u>
Overnight	95	97	91	94
2-day	96	90	87	89
3-day	97	91	86	90

According to New York District Office officials, delivery performance scores were high for mail destined to Manhattan and the Bronx because most first-class mail originates and is delivered locally, resulting in greater district office control. Delivery responsibility for mail originating locally but destined outside the district's jurisdiction rests with offices in the area of destination--and is therefore beyond the New York District's control.

What is the cause of late mail delivery?

Even if all delivery performance goals had been met in Manhattan and the Bronx, many millions of pieces of first-class stamped mail would have been delivered late each year. Actually, statistics for fiscal year 1977 showed that 6.4 percent--or about 48 million pieces--of first-class stamped mail was delivered late. Most late mail is only a day or two late; however, a small number may be excessively delayed, lost, mutilated, or destroyed.

Probably the most quantifiable cause for late mail delivery is missent mail. Properly addressed mail sent to the wrong destination because of human or machine error is termed "missent". Because mail sent to the wrong destination requires it to be rehandled at another facility, delivery is usually delayed.

During fiscal year 1977, the missent mail rates for the New York City Post Office averaged 3 percent. For the first two quarters of fiscal year 1978, the rates averaged 2.6 percent. National averages were 2.6 and 2.4 percent for the same periods.

When compared to other large post offices in terms of missent mail rates, the New York City Post Office does not fare badly. Missent mail rates for some of the other large facilities are shown below:

<u>Post Office</u>	<u>Percent of missent mail</u>
Baltimore	2.9
Philadelphia	3.0
Boston	3.7
Dallas	3.2
Los Angeles	3.5

Other causes of late mail delivery include

- transportation delays because of heavy traffic,
- equipment breakdowns,
- power failures,
- bad weather, and
- failure to meet mail dispatch schedules because of unusually high mail volume.

Complaints about the  
quality of mail service

Because late mail delivery results in customer dissatisfaction, the Service implemented a nationwide program in October 1975 to provide customers with a means to both lodge complaints and offer suggestions. Under this program, the postal patron completes a two-part consumer service card; one part for the local post office and the other for the Service's headquarters. Upon receipt of a complaint, the local postmaster is responsible for resolving the complainant's problem. The postmaster then reports the resolution to the Service's headquarters where the information is accumulated and analyzed.

During fiscal year 1977, approximately 409,000 consumer service cards were filed nationwide--about 14,500 pertained to Manhattan postal operations; about 900 pertained to Bronx operations.

Because of the significantly larger number of cards filed concerning Manhattan postal operations, we concentrated our analysis there. About 14,000 of the cards filed in Manhattan were complaints--8,725 concerned mail delivery. The following breaks down delivery service complaints by the class of mail affected.

Patron complaints concerning delivery services

<u>Type of mail affected</u>	<u>Number of complaints</u>	<u>Percent of total complaints</u>
Letters	5,514	63
Parcel post	1,139	13
Newspapers/magazines	1,980	23
Advertisements	<u>92</u>	<u>1</u>
	<u>8,725</u>	<u>100</u>
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Our analysis of Service statistics showed that the complaints by class of mail for Manhattan which were approximately the same for the Northeast Region and the Nation, fluctuated between accounting periods in a seemingly random pattern, and could be categorized as follows:

- Late delivery of mail.
- Mail delivered to the wrong address.
- Properly addressed mail returned as nondeliverable.
- Foul-ups in change-of-address orders.

CUSTOMER RETAILING SERVICES IN MANHATTAN  
AND THE BRONX ARE GENERALLY ADEQUATE

Our independent observations of waiting time for window services in the 20th Congressional District's 17 post offices showed that 44 percent of the patrons were served within 1 minute and that 75 percent were served in 3-1/2 minutes or less.

What is a reasonable waiting time for window services? The answer varies with individual preferences. Waiting 3-1/2 minutes or more may not disturb some patrons, but the Service has determined that many patrons may become agitated if required to wait more than 3-1/2 minutes. In the absence of criteria for measuring the reasonableness of waiting times in Manhattan and the Bronx, we used the Service's general guideline.

While there could be instances of patrons waiting in lines longer than 3-1/2 minutes in every post office in the 20th Congressional District, it seemed to be a problem in only four post offices--Radio City, Cathedral, Hamilton Grange, and Planetarium. The longer average waiting times in these offices indicate that the hours and/or number of windows open were not always sufficient to accommodate the postal patrons within a reasonable period of time.

Sampling technique

Basically our sample of waiting times consisted of 472 random observations made in approximate proportion to the number of patrons served by each of the 17 post offices in the district. The 472 observations were made over a 2-week period in July and August 1978. They were made from 8 a.m. to 6 p.m. during weekdays and 9 a.m. to 12 noon on Saturdays.

Waiting times for window services generally seem reasonable

The majority of postal patrons in the 20th Congressional District are receiving reasonably fast window service. As shown in the following table, a large percentage of postal patrons can expect to be served with little or no wait in line, while a smaller percentage of patrons may spend a much longer time standing in line for window services.

<u>Waiting times (minutes)</u>	<u>Relative frequency (percent)</u>	<u>Cumulative relative frequency (percent)</u>
0- 1.00	44.2	44.2
1.01- 2.00	16.5	60.7
2.01- 3.00	9.9	70.6
3.01- 3.50	3.7	74.3
3.51- 4.00	3.0	77.3
4.01- 5.00	5.1	82.4
5.01- 6.00	6.5	88.9
6.01- 7.00	3.1	92.0
7.01-10.00	4.2	96.2
10.01-17.60	3.8	100.0

The average waiting time for all 17 post offices in the 20th Congressional District amounted to 2.5 minutes. As shown in the following table, the average waiting time for each office ranged from 48 seconds (.8 minutes) to 6 minutes.

<u>Post Office</u>	<u>Average waiting time (minutes)</u>
Village Station	0.8
Inwood Station	0.9
Fort George Station	1.1
Riverdale Station	1.4
Audubon Station	1.6
General Post Office	1.6
Old Chelsea Station	1.9
Manhattanville Station	2.0
Times Square Station	2.1
Midtown Station	2.6
Ansonia Station	2.9
Kingsbridge Station	3.1
Washington Bridge Station	3.2
Radio City Station	3.6
Cathedral Station	4.4
Hamilton Grange Station	4.6
Planetarium Station	6.0
Average for all 17 post offices	2.5

Even post offices with short average waiting times will have instances of long waiting times. No doubt some long waits will be unavoidable. However, we observed a concentration of long waiting times in the last four offices shown above. The longer average waiting times in these offices indicate that the hours and/or number of windows open were not always sufficient to accommodate the postal patrons within a reasonable period of time.

Our analysis of waiting times by day of the week showed that waiting times are the longest on Saturdays, when the 17 post offices averaged 4.1 minutes. The following table shows average waiting times by days of the week.

	<u>Average waiting time (minutes)</u>
Monday	3.0
Tuesday	2.9
Wednesday	2.5
Thursday	1.8
Friday	1.8
Saturday	4.1

ASSISTANCE TO POSTAL  
PATRONS SEEMS REASONABLE

All postal facilities in the 20th Congressional District seemed to have adequate directories for guiding postal patrons to the type service desired. We noted bilingual directories in those neighborhoods with heavy ethnic patronage. We also noted that postal clerks and guards gave directions and assistance to patrons who asked for help.

If patrons are unfamiliar with the postal services provided or how the services are provided, some confusion will or should be anticipated. However, directories and postal officials are available to help eliminate the confusion.

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Copies of this report will be made available to the Postal Service and other interested parties 30 days from the date of the report unless you publicly release its contents earlier.

We will be available to discuss the matters in this report with you or your staff.

Sincerely yours,



Allen R. Voss  
Director