

June 22, 2000

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DISTRICT MANAGER, CUSTOMER SERVICE AND
SALES SPOKANE DISTRICT

SUBJECT: Responsiveness to Congressional Inquiries in
the Spokane District
(Report Number LR-LA-00-003)

This letter advisory presents the results of our review of the Spokane District's responsiveness to congressional inquiries from Representative George R. Nethercutt, Jr. (Project Number 00ER001LM000).

Results in Brief

We found that during 1998 and 1999,¹ 6 out of the 49 congressional inquiries reviewed from Representative Nethercutt, were not processed within the timeframes established in stated district policy. District management attributed nonresponsiveness to congressional inquiries to turnover in a key position. District management recognized the importance of following established timeframes for responding to inquiries. Specifically, we found that relations with Representative Nethercutt's office had improved as a result of Spokane District management initiatives to foster proactive and effective communication with the local congressional office. The Spokane District was generally responsive to inquiries from Representative Nethercutt's office.

Background

The Office of the Inspector General (OIG) received correspondence from Representative George R. Nethercutt, Jr., expressing concern about the significant number of complaints received from constituents relating to the Spokane District, and alleging nonresponsiveness of

¹ We analyzed inquiries received in calendar years 1998 and 1999. In 1999, we reviewed inquiries received from January through November.

district staff to congressional inquiries. In his correspondence to the OIG, Representative Nethercutt noted that the House Report for the Fiscal Year 1999 Treasury-Postal Appropriation Act urged an audit and review of postal operations in the Spokane District, specifically focusing on customer service, labor-management relations and bidding irregularities. Based on discussions with Representative Nethercutt's Spokane staff we agreed that we would limit our review to the District's responsiveness to his inquiries.

The management instruction, PO-250-93-2, Complaint Resolution and Proper Use of the Customer Service Card states that congressional inquiries are to be processed according to Administrative Support Manual Section 338.² The Spokane District's Congressional Inquiries Response standard operating procedure gives the manager of Consumer Affairs oversight responsibility for all congressional inquiries. The policy sets a standard of five working days for designated managers and postmasters to respond to the manager of Consumer Affairs regarding the inquiry, allowing ten working days as a maximum time for response. The manager of Consumer Affairs monitors and evaluates inquiry responses for accuracy and completeness. The responses are then forwarded to the congressional representative's office via mail, telephone, fax, or electronic mail.

Objective, Scope, and Methodology

The objective of our review was to evaluate the responsiveness of the Spokane District to congressional inquiries from Representative Nethercutt. We reviewed congressional inquiries received by the Spokane District from Representative Nethercutt during 1998 and 1999.³ We interviewed Postal Service employees in the Spokane District to obtain an understanding of the handling of congressional inquiries.

We reviewed management instruction, PO-250-93-2, Complaint Resolution and Proper Use of the Customer Service Card; Administrative Support Manual Section 338

² Section 338.33 of the Administrative Support Manual authorizes field managers to respond directly to governmental inquiries.

³ The manager of Consumer Affairs could not generate a listing of all cases received prior to and during 1998 due to limitations with the Consumer Affairs Tracking System. However, he provided a listing of 19 cases for 1998 and 30 cases for 1999.

Legislative, Executive Relations (specifically sub-section 338.33 Field); the Western Area Consumer Affairs Focuses for 2000; and the Spokane District's Congressional Inquiries Response standard operating procedure to gain further understanding of the handling of congressional inquiries.

This review was conducted from November 1999 through June 2000 in accordance with the President's Council on Integrity and Efficiency Quality Standards for Inspections. We discussed our conclusions and observations with appropriate management officials and included their comments, where appropriate.

Observations

The Spokane District was generally responsive to inquiries from Representative Nethercutt's office. Specifically, we found that relations with Representative Nethercutt's office had improved as a result of Spokane District management initiatives to foster proactive and effective communication with the local congressional office.

The Spokane District manager implemented the following initiatives to improve relations with the local congressional office:

- Conduct regular meetings with congressional staff representatives to encourage communication.
- Document written processes to formally monitor the district's timeliness and responsiveness to congressional inquiries.

In interviews, Representative Nethercutt's local staff confirmed a significant improvement in relations with the district and an increased responsiveness to staff's inquiries.

In 1998 and 1999 the district received at least 49 inquiries from Representative Nethercutt's office. Four of the nineteen inquiries in 1998 and two of the thirty inquiries in 1999 reviewed were not responded to within the timeframes established in the district policy. The response time for the four late responses in 1998 ranged from 16 to 57 days. The response times for the two late responses in 1999 were 15 and 19 days.

District management attributed nonresponsiveness to congressional inquiries to turnover in a key position from 1998 through May 1999. Specifically, the manager of Consumer Affairs has oversight responsibility for congressional inquiries. However, from January 1998 to May 1999, five different individuals held that position.

In summary, our review determined that relations with and responsiveness to Representative Nethercutt's congressional inquiries have improved. Our discussions with Representative Nethercutt's staff confirmed that congressional relations within the Spokane District have improved as a result of these initiatives.

Since this report does not contain suggestions, formal comments are not required. However, if you have comments on this report, please forward them to this office no later than June 29, 2000. We appreciated the cooperation and courtesies provided by your staff during the review. If you have any questions, please contact [REDACTED], Labor Management (Rosslyn), or me at (703) 248-2300.

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