



OFFICE OF
**INSPECTOR
GENERAL**
UNITED STATES POSTAL SERVICE

**Timely Processing of Mail at the
Pittsburgh, PA Processing and
Distribution Center**

Audit Report

September 18, 2012

Report Number NO-AR-12-008



OFFICE OF
**INSPECTOR
GENERAL**
UNITED STATES POSTAL SERVICE

HIGHLIGHTS

September 18, 2012

Timely Processing of Mail at the Pittsburgh, PA Processing and Distribution Center

Report Number NO-AR-12-008

BACKGROUND:

The U.S. Postal Service is facing one of the most difficult challenges in its history, recently reporting a net loss of \$5.2 billion in the third quarter of fiscal year (FY) 2012. FY 2012 will be the 6th year in a row that the Postal Service has reported a net loss from operations. One factor driving these losses is the continual decline in mail volume, falling from its peak of 213 billion pieces in FY 2006 to 166 billion in FY 2011.

The Postal Service has more than 300 plants with mail processing operations. Excessive delayed mail adversely impacts mailers and U.S. Postal Service customers. An analysis of delayed mail during FY 2011 identified the Pittsburgh, PA Processing and Distribution Center (P&DC) in the Western Pennsylvania District in the Eastern Area as a facility with high delayed mail volume. In FY 2011, Standard Mail accounted for 51 percent of mail volume and \$17.8 billion in revenue.

Our objective was to determine whether Pittsburgh P&DC employees processed mail in a timely manner.

WHAT THE OIG FOUND:

The Pittsburgh P&DC experienced difficulties with timely processing of all

mail during FY 2011, the bulk of it being Standard Mail. Among the 43 largest Postal Service facilities, the Pittsburgh P&DC ranked second highest, with more than 12 percent delayed mail volume. The primary causes for the excessive delayed mail were underuse of mail processing equipment, poor mail flow, and failure to follow operating procedures. As a result, mail was not processed in a timely manner, thereby adversely impacting customer service and jeopardizing Postal Service revenue.

WHAT THE OIG RECOMMENDED:

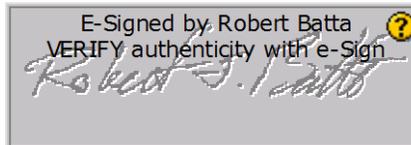
We recommended the district manager, Western Pennsylvania District, adjust workhours, assignments, and other operational requirements to ensure the Pittsburgh P&DC processes mail timely as compared to similar-sized sites. We also recommended the district manager increase tray sorters' capacity and throughput and expand the windows of operation. Further, we recommended the district manager improve mail flow throughout the facility and train employees to ensure proper color coding of Standard Mail according to Postal Service policy.

[Link to review the entire report](#)



September 18, 2012

MEMORANDUM FOR: ROBERT CINTRON
DISTRICT MANAGER, WESTERN PENNSYLVANIA
DISTRICT



FROM: Robert J. Batta
Deputy Assistant Inspector General
for Mission Operations

SUBJECT: Audit Report – Timely Processing of Mail at the Pittsburgh,
PA Processing and Distribution Center
(Report Number NO-AR-12-008)

This report presents the results of our audit of Timely Processing of Mail at the Pittsburgh, PA Processing and Distribution Center in the Western Pennsylvania District of the Eastern Area (Project Number 12XG026NO000).

We appreciate the cooperation and courtesies provided by your staff. If you have any questions or need additional information, please contact James Ballard, director, Network Processing, or me at 703-248-2100.

Attachments

cc: Jordan M. Small
David E. Williams, Jr.
Frank Neri
John M. Bender
Deborah Giannoni-Jackson
Corporate Audit and Response Management

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Introduction

This report presents the results of our audit of the timely processing of mail at the Pittsburgh, PA Processing and Distribution Center (P&DC) in the Western Pennsylvania District of the Eastern Area (Project Number 12XG026NO000). Our objective was to determine whether mail at the Pittsburgh P&DC was processed in a timely manner. This self-initiated audit addresses operational risk. See [Appendix A](#) for additional information about this audit.

Excessive delayed mail adversely impacts mailers and U.S. Postal Service customers. A review of delayed mail during fiscal year (FY) 2011 identified the Pittsburgh P&DC as a facility with high delayed mail volume. The Pittsburgh P&DC is in the Western Pennsylvania District of the Eastern Area. The Pittsburgh P&DC processed 1.75 billion mailpieces during FY 2011. Additionally, as part of the Postal Service's network realignment process, the Pittsburgh P&DC is scheduled to absorb mail volume from several surrounding facilities.¹

Figure 1: The Pittsburgh P&DC



Source: U.S. Postal Service Office of Inspector General (OIG) photograph, dated June 29, 2012.

Conclusion

The Pittsburgh P&DC experienced difficulties with the timely processing of all mail during FY 2011, with the bulk of the delays being in Standard Mail. Although timely processing of mail at the Pittsburgh P&DC improved during the first three quarters of FY 2012, additional opportunities for improvement exist. The primary causes for the excessive delayed mail were underutilization of mail processing equipment, poor mail

¹ Pittsburgh will receive additional equipment from the New Castle and Greensburg Processing and Distribution Facilities (P&DFs).

flow, and failure to follow color-coding² procedures. Delayed mail impacts customer service and adversely affects mailers, thereby, placing Postal Service revenue at risk³. During the audit, management began to take corrective action in numerous areas.

Delayed Mail Trends and Site Comparisons

Delayed mail volume at the Pittsburgh P&DC increased from more than 156 million pieces in FY 2010 to more than 222 million pieces in FY 2011. This represented an increase of more than 40 percent, while mail volume increased by only about 10 percent (see Table 1).

Table 1: Pittsburgh P&DC Delayed Mail Trends, FYs 2010 to 2011

	Total Delayed Mail	Mail Volume: Total First-Handled Pieces (FHP) ⁴
FY 2010	156,309,636	1,591,090,882
FY 2011	222,129,520	1,754,353,264
Increase in Delayed Mail Volume	65,819,884	163,262,383
Percent Change	42.11%	10.26%

Source: Enterprise Data Warehouse (EDW), as of July 1, 2012.

During FY 2012, the Pittsburgh P&DC has shown improvements in reducing delayed volume through increased processing efficiency and the decline in mail volume. During Quarters 1 and 2, FY 2012, delayed mail volume decreased more than 27 and 51 percent, respectively, compared to the same periods in FYs 2010 and 2011. Similar-sized facilities reported less than a 24 and 41 percent reduction during the same period. Standard Mail accounted for 94 percent of all delayed mail at the Pittsburgh P&DC during this period.

For FY 2011, the Pittsburgh P&DC had the second highest percentage of delayed mail as a percentage of total mail or FHP volume among similar-sized facilities with 12.66 percent. Percentages ranged from 13.41 percent to 0.18 percent with an average of 4.86 percent (see [Appendix B](#)).

Furthermore, when we ranked (the lower the ranking, the higher the amount of delayed mail) the Pittsburgh P&DC with 43 similar-sized facilities by mail class in FY 2011, we found it had:

- 222 million pieces of total delayed mail, ranking it second among the facilities.

² The Postal Service uses a system of color coding to facilitate timely movement of Standard Mail. The color-coding process assigns a color to each day of the week. This enables easy processing of mail using the first-in, first-out (FIFO) method.

³ Postal Service revenue at risk will be reported in the OIG audit *Timeliness of Mail Processing in the Processing and Distribution Network* (to be issued late September 2012).

⁴ A letter, flat, or parcel that receives its initial distribution at a Postal Service facility. FHP records mail volume in the operation where it receives its first distribution handling.

- 1.6 million pieces of delayed First-Class™ Mail, ranking it 18th among the facilities.
- 10.2 million pieces of delayed Periodicals, ranking it fifth among the facilities.
- 210 million pieces of delayed Standard Mail, ranking it second among the facilities.

The *President's Commission on the U.S. Postal Service* report, dated July 31, 2003, states that the mission of the Postal Service is:

. . . to provide high-quality, essential postal services to all persons and communities by the most cost-effective and efficient means possible at affordable and, where appropriate, uniform rates.

39 U.S.C., Part 1, Chapter 4, §403, states:

The Postal Service shall plan, develop, promote, and provide adequate and efficient postal services at fair and reasonable rates and fees.

The primary causes for excessive delayed mail were:

- Underuse of mail processing equipment.
- Poor mail flow, due to inadequate floor plan layout and floor congestion.
- Improper color-coding of mail.

In FY 2011, Standard Mail accounted for 51 percent of mail volume and \$17.8 billion in revenue. Excessive delayed mail adversely impacts mailers and Postal Service customers.

Machine Capacity and Productivity

The Pittsburgh P&DC generally had sufficient machine processing capacity to process its mail timely. However, opportunities exist to better use the high-speed tray sorter⁵ (HSTS) and the low-cost tray sorter⁶ (LCTS) to separate trayed mail for further processing on another mail-processing machine. The HSTS and the LCTS can be operated for 23 hours per day with 1 hour of maintenance. Since Quarter 3, FY 2011, the average daily run time on the LCTS has often been below 6 hours a day. While average daily run time on the HSTS has been about 19 hours per day, productivity is well below national averages.

In addition, during observations, we noted the Pittsburgh P&DC did not staff all loading points of the HSTS. Management at the Pittsburgh P&DC indicated letter mail trays that were not sorted timely for processing on the delivery bar code sorters caused the

⁵ An automated tray system able to sort 3,000 trays per hour to 52 separations.

⁶ Mechanized tray sorters are not standardized, but usually involve trays traveling on a main conveyor until they are displaced into one of the system's runouts where they may receive additional manual separations. These machines are commonly called low-cost tray sorters.

majority of their delayed mail. By increasing machine runtime, the Pittsburgh P&DC could process more mail and minimize delayed mail volumes.

Rather than efficiently using available capacity at the Pittsburgh P&DC, the facility has used other local processing facilities to process some of the mail trays. However, future consolidations of Postal Service processing facilities may eliminate this option. One option the Pittsburgh P&DC is considering is purchasing an additional HSTS to increase processing capacity.

Figure 2: The HSTS



Source: OIG photograph, dated June 26, 2012, 12:15 p.m. The Pittsburgh P&DC has one high-speed tray sorter. It runs incoming First-Class Mail, Standard Mail, and outgoing mail during all three tours.

Mail Flow

We found that poor mail flow was a major impediment in the timely processing of mail at the Pittsburgh P&DC. Our observations revealed poor floor plan layout and floor congestion caused by unprocessed mail transportation equipment (MTE).

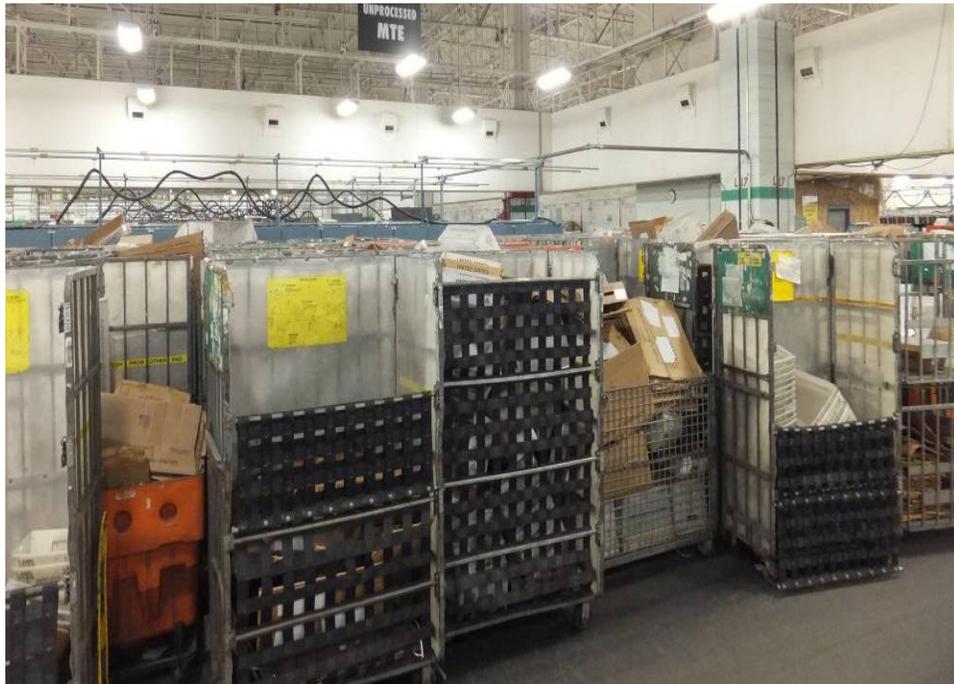
Processing plants generate empty MTEs whenever a tray of mail is emptied for processing. Once a tray is emptied, it should be stacked on a pallet to eliminate re-handling and floor congestion. Once the pallet is full, the trays are shrink-wrapped and ready for their next use (see [Figure 3](#)). During our observations, we noted large areas of the Pittsburgh P&DC filled with empty letter and flat trays (see [Figure 4](#) and [Figure 5](#)).

Figure 3: Best Practices for Empty Tray Handling



Source: OIG photograph, taken May 10, 2011. Example of properly stacked MTE.

Figure 4: Unprocessed MTE



Source: OIG photograph, taken June 27, 2012. Large areas of the Pittsburgh P&DC were filled with empty letter and flat trays.

Figure 5: Unprocessed MTE



Source: OIG photograph, taken June 27, 2012. Large areas of the Pittsburgh P&DC were filled with empty letter and flat trays.

Pittsburgh P&DC management can improve mail flow by redesigning the center's floor plan. Specifically, during observations we noted that:

- Mail does not arrive at the dock close to where it will be initially processed. This requires employees to transport some mail across the building for initial processing.
- The HSTS has a 'U'-shaped setup, placing induction points and takeaway areas close to each other, thereby, blocking smooth removal of processed mail. This causes congestion during processing.
- Advanced Facer Canceller Systems (AFCS) are not oriented toward the next processing point. Cancelled letter mail from the AFCSs is trayed and placed on rollers, where it must then be loaded on rolling stock and moved to the next operation, rather than just being moved across an aisle or entering a tray system (see [Figure 6](#)).
- Staging areas lack clear labeling or lane markings to identify mail class or processing order.

Figure 6: AFCS



Source: OIG photograph, dated June 26, 2012. Cancelled letter mail from the Automated Facer Cancellation System is trayed and placed on the rollers, where they must then be loaded on rolling stock and moved to the next operation.

Color Coding of Standard Mail

Color coding of Standard Mail at the Pittsburgh P&DC could use improvement. The Postal Service uses a system of color coding to facilitate timely movement of Standard Mail. The color-coding process assigns a color to each day of the week. This enables easy processing of mail using the FIFO method. Additionally, the tag identifies the scheduled delivery day for the mail and allows for accurate delayed mail reporting. During observations the week of June 25, 2012, only 98 of 284 containers of mail (or 35 percent) were properly color coded. The other containers either had incomplete tags (see [Figure 7](#)), the wrong color tag, or no tag. As a result, the Pittsburgh P&DC cannot ensure timely processing, dispatch, and delivery of Standard Mail.

Figure 7: Incomplete Color-Code Tag



Source: OIG photograph, taken June 27, 2012. The color-code tag contains neither the date or time, making it difficult to process the mail in FIFO order and accurately report.

Management Action

During the audit, management at the Pittsburgh P&DC took several actions to improve operational efficiency. Specifically, they:

- Updated the plant operating plan with current mail volumes and arrival profiles, providing a tool to facilitate improved mail flow.
- Reissued their policy on handling empty MTE.
- Improved the accuracy of delayed mail counts, thereby aiding resource allocation.

Recommendations

We recommend the district manager, Western Pennsylvania District:

1. Adjust workhours, assignments, and other operational requirements to ensure the Pittsburgh Processing and Distribution Center processes mail timely as compared to similar-sized sites.
2. Increase the high-speed tray sorter and low-cost tray sorter's throughput and windows of operation.
3. Increase tray processing capacity and improve mail flow throughout the facility.
4. Train employees to ensure proper color coding of Standard Mail according to Postal Service policy.

Management's Comments

Management agreed with the recommendations in the report. Specifically, management stated that in response to recommendation 1, effective October 2012, the Pittsburgh P&DC agreed to realign the workforce based on the results of a volume arrival profile and Run Plan Generator. In response to recommendation 2, effective July 2012, the high-speed tray sorter will dedicate more hours to the processing of Standard A since mail will be prepared prior to entering the plant. In response to recommendation 3, effective August 2012, additional letter processing machines are available since the Automated Parcel Bundle Sorter has been relocated to the Logistics & Distribution Center. As a result, the low-cost tray sorter will be available to process additional tray volume. In response to recommendation 4, effective October 2012, in-plant support will conduct training regarding color-coding procedures for craft and management.

See [Appendix C](#) for management's comments, in their entirety.

Evaluation of Management's Comments

The U.S. Postal Service OIG considers management's comments responsive to the recommendations and corrective actions should resolve the issues identified in the report.

Appendix A: Additional Information

Background

Mail processing is an integrated group of activities⁷ required to sort and distribute mail for dispatch and eventual delivery. Post offices, stations, and branches send outgoing (originating) mail to P&DCs and P&DFs for processing and dispatch for a designated service area. P&DCs report directly to area offices on mail processing matters. They also provide instructions on the preparation of collection mail, dispatch schedules, and sort plan requirements to associate offices and mailers. The Postal Service has more than 300 plants with mail processing operations.

We divided the plants that process mail into seven groups ranked by FY 2011 mail volume. The Group 1 plants are the largest and the Group 7 plants the smallest (see Figure 8).

Figure 8: Plant Grouping Based On FY 2011 Mail Volume

Group	Number of Plants	FY 2011 Mail Volume
1	43	Greater than 1,300,000,000 mailpieces
2	45	765,000,000 to 1,300,000,000 mailpieces
3	46	476,000,000 to 765,000,000 mailpieces
4	44	340,000,000 to 476,000,000 mailpieces
5	44	221,000,000 to 340,000,000 mailpieces
6	40	136,000,000 to 221,000,000 mailpieces
7	34	0 to 136,000,000 mailpieces

Source: EDW, as of August 2012.

The Pittsburgh P&DC is in the Western Pennsylvania District of the Eastern Area. The Pittsburgh P&DC processed 1.75 billion mailpieces during FY 2011.

Objective, Scope, and Methodology

Our objective was to determine whether mail at the Pittsburgh P&DC was processed timely. To meet our objective, we conducted interviews; performed analysis of mail volumes, workhours, and machine output; analyzed trends; and conducted observations of the facility.

We used computer-processed data from the Mail Condition Reporting System, EDW, and the Management Operating Data System. We pulled data from October 1, 2009 through June 30, 2012, but did not test controls over these systems. However, we

⁷ Mail processing activities include culling, edging, stacking, facing, canceling, sorting, tying, pouching, and bundling.

checked the reasonableness of results by confirming our analysis and results with management and multiple data sources.

We conducted this performance audit from May through September 2012 in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards and included such tests of internal controls as we considered necessary under the circumstances. Those standards require that we plan and perform the audit to obtain sufficient, appropriate evidence to provide a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objective. We believe that the evidence obtained provides a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objective. We discussed our observations and conclusions with management on August 14, 2012, and included their comments where appropriate.

We assessed the reliability of computer-generated data by interviewing agency officials knowledgeable about the data. We determined that the data were sufficiently reliable for the purposes of this report.

Prior Audit Coverage

Report Title	Report Number	Final Report Date	Monetary Impact	Report Results
<i>Timely Processing of Mail at the Richmond, VA Processing and Distribution Center</i>	NO-AR-11-008	9/13/2011	None	We found the Richmond P&DC experienced difficulties with timely processing of mail during FY 2010 and Quarter 1 of FY 2011. Delayed mail volume rose from 22.6 million pieces to 54.2 million pieces over a 2-year period. The causes of the excessive delayed mail were inadequate staffing and supervision, low mail throughput on machines, and failure to consistently color code arriving mail. Other causes included not accurately identifying and reporting delayed mail and mail damage caused by poor packaging. We recommended the district manager, Richmond District, promptly assess the current mail volume and swiftly adjust workhours, assignments, sort plans, transportation, and other operational requirements to ensure the Richmond P&DC meets customer and service commitments. Management agreed with our findings.

**Appendix B: Pittsburgh Processing and Distribution Center Fiscal Year 2011
Delayed Mail as a Percentage of First-Handled Pieces Compared to Similar-Sized
Facilities**

Ranking	Facility	Total Delayed	Total FHP	Percentage of Delayed Mail
1	St. Louis P&DC	299,691,131	2,234,774,229	13.41%
2	Pittsburgh P&DC	222,129,520	1,754,253,264	12.66%
3	Cleveland P&DC	172,808,131	1,440,732,212	11.99%
4	Metroplex P&DC	169,253,645	1,667,209,251	10.15%
5	Columbus P&DC	180,225,697	1,884,935,125	9.56%
6	Richmond P&DC	150,346,982	1,576,275,620	9.54%
7	Carol Stream P&DC	143,449,955	1,686,548,045	8.51%
8	Palatine P&DC	110,420,449	1,326,736,959	8.32%
9	North Metro P&DC	138,155,152	1,664,835,551	8.30%
10	Milwaukee P&DC	122,676,890	1,594,263,961	7.69%
11	Philadelphia P&DC	130,910,811	1,746,291,354	7.50%
12	Cincinnati P&DC	110,198,794	1,666,123,737	6.61%
13	Cardiss Collins P&DC	103,872,323	1,606,023,849	6.47%
14	Oakland P&DC	111,343,595	1,765,823,048	6.31%
15	Salt Lake P&DC	83,020,464	1,317,853,031	6.30%
16	Indianapolis P&DC	87,917,015	1,486,115,876	5.92%
17	Portland P&DC	45,346,326	919,812,610	4.93%
18	Charlotte P&DC	58,912,764	1,253,088,148	4.70%
19	Mid-Island P&DC	90,293,611	1,976,360,200	4.57%
20	Minneapolis P&DC	66,125,869	1,659,189,670	3.99%
21	Dominick V. Daniels P&DC	89,411,274	2,304,986,774	3.88%
22	Kansas City P&DC	74,550,911	1,984,515,906	3.76%
23	Denver P&DC	83,679,903	2,525,211,014	3.31%
24	San Francisco P&DC	52,519,281	1,611,341,130	3.26%
25	Nashville P&DC	41,131,762	1,287,951,463	3.19%
26	Phoenix P&DC	57,147,390	1,949,829,752	2.93%
27	Santa Clarita P&DC	44,584,011	1,608,454,194	2.77%
28	Margaret L. Sellers P&DC	41,160,982	1,558,665,542	2.64%
29	Jacksonville P&DC	33,119,942	1,440,063,363	2.30%
30	North Texas P&DC	37,364,409	1,686,540,595	2.22%
31	Fort Worth P&DC	30,887,110	1,472,165,855	2.10%
32	Atlanta P&DC	32,369,378	1,587,577,811	2.04%
33	Sacramento P&DC	34,549,161	1,749,080,280	1.98%
34	Morgan P&DC	30,669,043	1,578,768,517	1.94%
35	Baltimore P&DC	17,282,766	1,057,219,645	1.63%
36	North Houston P&DC	19,186,746	1,617,797,009	1.19%
37	Santa Ana P&DC	18,917,770	1,597,644,236	1.18%
38	Los Angeles P&DC	25,950,584	2,389,500,763	1.09%
39	Tampa P&DC	14,108,973	1,622,917,449	0.87%
40	San Antonio P&DC	10,954,748	1,338,275,043	0.82%
41	Houston P&DC	12,926,264	1,602,289,281	0.81%
42	Dallas P&DC	9,445,814	1,308,316,079	0.72%
43	Seattle P&DC	2,077,427	1,150,555,853	0.18%
Totals		3,411,094,773	70,256,913,294	4.86%

. Source: EDW, as of July 1, 2012.

Appendix C: Management's Comments



September 12, 2012

LUCINE WILLIS
DIRECTOR, AUDIT OPERATIONS

SUBJECT: Timely Processing of Mail at the Pittsburgh, PA Processing and
Distribution Center
(Report Number NO-AR-12 – DRAFT)

Thank you for the opportunity to respond to the recommendations contained in the Draft Audit Report - Timely Processing of Mail at the Pittsburgh, PA Processing and Distribution Center (Report Number NO-AR-12 – DRAFT). Management agrees with all recommendations.

Recommendation 1:

Adjust work hours, assignments, and other operational requirements to ensure the Pittsburgh Processing and Distribution Center processes mail timely as compared to similar-size sites.

Management Response/Action Plan:

Management agrees with the recommendation. The Pittsburgh Processing and Distribution Center is in the process of realigning the current complement. Run plans analysis and Volume Arrival have been done and the realignment of operational staff is being adjusted accordingly. Maintenance will also be realigned to meet the operational needs. The National Labeling List has been changed to meet the need of Western Pennsylvania District. This change will expedite mail to the SCF plants that the Pittsburgh Processing and Distribution Center services.

Target Implementation Date:

September 3 thru October 26, 2012

Responsible Official:

Manager In-Plant Support

Recommendation 2:

Increase the High Speed Tray Sorter and Low Cost Tray Sorter's throughput, and windows of operation.

Management Response/Action Plan:

Management agrees with the recommendation. The Pittsburgh Processing and Distribution Center is currently desleeving all of the STD-A trays processed on the High Speed Tray Sorter. The Pittsburgh Logistic and Distribution Center is now desleeving the MXSTS STD trays before sending the tray to the Pittsburgh Processing and Distribution Center. This volume will bypass the High Speed Tray Sorter and create a larger window of operation for the destinating STD-A volume.

Target Implementation Date:

July 2012

Responsible Official:

Senior Plant Manager

Recommendation 3:

Increase tray processing capacity and improve mail flow throughout the facility.

Management Response/Action Plan:

Management agrees with the recommendation. The APBS has been relocated to the Pittsburgh Logistic and Distribution Center which has decreased the volume processed on the Low Cost Universal Sorter. The Low Cost Universal Sorter is now processing outgoing trays, which has improved the arrival of Pittsburgh Processing and Distribution Center outgoing volume to the Pittsburgh Logistic and Distribution Center for surface transportation.

Target Implementation Date:

August 2012

Responsible Official:

Senior Plant Manager

Recommendation 4:

Train employees to ensure proper color-coding of Standard Mail according to Postal Service policy.

Management Response/Action Plan:

Management agrees with the recommendation. All records of training will be reviewed again and EAS staffing will be identified that have not taken the proper training. In-Plant Support will also be tasked with hands on training to both EAS and craft employees that are involved with color coding. In-Plant Support will perform audits and verification that color policy is being adhered.

Target Implementation Date:

October 31, 2012

Responsible Official:

Senior Plant Manager
Manager In-Plant Support


J. Martin Bender
A/Sr. Plant Manager
WPA District

cc: Jordan M. Small
Robert Cintron
David E. Williams, Jr.
Frank Neri
J. Martin Bender
Deborah Giannoni-Jackson
Corporate Audit and Response Management