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United States General Accounting Office

GAO

Briefing Report to the Honorable
Benjamin A. Gilman
House of Representatives

May 1986

POSTAL SERVICE

Late Mail Delivery in White Plains, New York



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United States
General Accounting Office
Washington, D.C. 20548

General Government Division

MAY 13 1986

B-217917

The Honorable Benjamin A. Gilman
House of Representatives

Dear Mr. Gilman:

After receiving complaints of late deliveries to some businesses, you asked us on June 11, 1985, to examine the U.S. Postal Service's procedures for delivering mail in the White Plains, New York, area. Because the White Plains Post Office was acting to provide delivery on schedule, your representatives agreed we should delay our review a few months. We began our review in November 1985 when the post office's measures were fully implemented.

This report presents the results of our review, which we discussed with your representatives on January 29, 1986. In brief, we learned that the action taken by the White Plains Post Office, although beneficial, did not result in mail being delivered on schedule. The White Plains Post Office has been experiencing a substantial growth in the volume of mail it delivers. This growth is causing carriers to take longer to ready or sort mail for delivery which, in turn, is causing later mail deliveries. Local and regional Service officials are developing and considering further ways to accelerate the sorting process so that carriers can start deliveries on schedule. See appendix I for details on the results of our work.

In commenting on a draft of this report, the Service said the report accurately reflects the late delivery problems the White Plains Post Office has been experiencing but, starting in June 1986, it hopes to be able to deliver mail by noon to most businesses on 17 business routes in White Plains. Further, the Service said that after improving the delivery time on the 17 business routes, the other routes in White Plains will be examined with the aim of improving delivery time. (See page 12 and app. II for the Service's comments.)

As arranged with your representative, unless you publicly announce its contents earlier, we plan no further distribution of this report until 30 days from the date of the report. At that time we will send copies to interested parties and make copies available to others upon request. If you have further questions on the matters discussed in this report, please contact Mr. Willis Elmore on 268-4950.

Sincerely yours,

James G. Mitchell
Senior Associate Director

MAIL DELIVERY PROCEDURES
IN WHITE PLAINS, NEW YORK

OBJECTIVES, SCOPE, AND METHODOLOGY

On June 11, 1985, Representative Benjamin A. Gilman asked us to examine the U.S. Postal Service's mail delivery procedures in the White Plains, New York, area. Mr. Gilman said the White Plains business community was concerned that the daily operations of some businesses were being seriously hampered by mail deliveries apparently as late as mid-afternoon.

The month before the request, we issued a report on mail delivery procedures in White Plains and presented the actions the Service had taken and planned to take to eliminate late mail deliveries. (Mail Delivery Procedures in White Plains, New York, GAO/GGD-85-52, May 15, 1985.) On June 28, 1985, we discussed the report and Mr. Gilman's concerns with his representatives who agreed that we should wait a few months before returning to White Plains to evaluate

--how successful the Service was in implementing the planned actions and

--whether those actions effectively eliminated late mail delivery.

Our delay in returning to White Plains would afford the Service time to implement the planned actions, make them fully operational, and gain knowledge on their effect.

In November 1985 we began our work to determine whether the planned actions were implemented successfully and, if so, whether the late delivery problem was resolved. To make our determinations, we interviewed officials of the White Plains Post Office and the Westchester Management Sectional Center. (Officials of the White Plains Post Office report to the sectional center.) We observed the sectional center dispatching mail to White Plains, the mail processing unit at White Plains sorting mail to carrier routes, and letter carriers at White Plains sorting mail for delivery. We obtained statistics from the White Plains Post Office on how much mail it delivers (the statistics covered all of fiscal years 1984 and 1985 and part of 1986). In addition, we interviewed an official from the Service's national Delivery Services Department and reviewed pertinent regulations, policies, and records. We essentially completed our data gathering efforts in December 1985 (but with subsequent updates), and we briefed Mr. Gilman's representatives in January on the results of our work.

SUMMARY

The same situation we reported in May existed in November, despite the actions taken by the White Plains Post Office. Letter carriers are supposed to leave the White Plains Post Office between 9:00 a.m. and 9:30 a.m. to begin delivering mail. However, on many routes, the carriers are leaving much later, causing deliveries to be later as well. They are leaving past schedule because the volume of mail they must ready for delivery has grown considerably. The White Plains Post Office delivered nearly 19 percent more mail in fiscal year 1985 than in fiscal year 1984, which was in addition to the almost 23-percent increase experienced in fiscal year 1984 over fiscal year 1983.

To eliminate late departures, the White Plains Post Office added staff to help carriers ready mail for delivery. (To ready mail for delivery, carriers sort or "case" the mail to the delivery stops on their respective routes.) As we reported in May, the post office obtained permission to hire additional carriers to help case mail; each additional carrier would provide help on several different routes as needed. We learned in November that 7 additional carriers were providing help on 33 routes, and the help was beneficial. For some routes, the help cut 30 to 60 minutes off the amount of time carriers were late leaving the office and, for other routes, it kept the number of minutes late from becoming even larger.

However, even with casing help, carriers on the 33 routes are often 30 to 60 minutes late in leaving the post office, according to the White Plains Post Office's Customer Services Manager. White Plains has 72 carrier routes and, according to the manager, carriers on the 39 routes not receiving help also leave the post office late. They frequently leave at least 30 minutes past schedule.¹

Much of the mail the White Plains Post Office delivers is trucked to the post office from the Westchester Management Sectional Center. (The sectional center is a large mail

¹In our May report, we said the White Plains Post Office considered carriers late leaving the post office if they exceeded their scheduled departure times by more than 30 minutes. In other words, the post office gave carriers a 30-minute leeway or margin in judging whether a carrier left late. The White Plains Post Office no longer applies the margin in defining whether a carrier is late. During this review, the post office's Customer Services Manager said carriers were late regardless of the margin because they are reaching their delivery stops later than they otherwise would.

processing facility that sorts and routes mail to a number of post offices.) We learned that, frequently, anywhere from 20 to 30 percent of a day's mail from the sectional center reached the post office on the last truck, which arrived around 6:25 a.m. That much mail at that hour, we believed, gave carriers little chance of meeting their scheduled departure time because of the sorting the White Plains Post Office must do. After receiving the mail, the post office's mail processing unit sorts it to the individual carrier routes and then the carriers case it to the delivery stops on the routes.² Following up on a suggestion we made, sectional center officials revised the transportation schedule in order to get all mail to White Plains by 6:00 a.m. This revision is intended to improve the post office's chances of meeting its sorting and casing schedule.

In a further attempt to eliminate late departures and deliveries, the White Plains Post Office has proposed changing the mail processing unit's starting and finishing times, having carriers begin work (that is, casing) earlier, and providing carriers more casing help and help in delivering mail. As of March 26, 1986, sectional center officials were studying the proposal; they must approve it before the post office can implement it.

The Service's Northeast Regional Office is also trying to resolve the late delivery problem in White Plains. The region, according to the White Plains postmaster, pulled together a special seven-member team to develop approaches to sorting mail at White Plains which would enable carriers to leave on schedule. The team began working in White Plains on March 26.

SERVICE PROVIDES EXPECTATIONS OF WHEN DELIVERY SHOULD OCCUR

Except for Express Mail, the Service does not guarantee that a piece of mail will reach the addressee by or within a specified time.³ However, the Service has national delivery or service standards that it strives to achieve for all classes of mail. These standards define the number of days in which

²Throughout this report we present a generalized picture of mail sorting operations at the White Plains Post Office. Because it is generalized, exceptions exist. For example, packs of letters that large mailers identify as going to specific carrier routes bypass the mail processing unit.

³Express Mail is the class of mail which receives the highest handling priority. For a premium price, delivery is promised on time or postage is refunded upon application by the mailer.

delivery should--without guarantee--occur. For example, the Service's objective is to sort, transport, and deliver First-Class letters within 1 to 3 days after receiving them. The number of days depends on the distance between originating and destinating post offices. Through the operating plans⁴ of local post offices, the Service attempts to provide mail delivery to individual businesses and households at approximately the same time each day. Although the Service has both national delivery standards and local operating plans, it does not have criteria for judging whether carrier delivery to individual businesses and households is late.

Letter carrier's workday:
office and delivery segments

In general, a letter carrier's workday is divided into office time and delivery time. During office time, a carrier spends time within a post office readying mail for delivery. This is done, in large part, by sorting or casing the mail to be delivered. To case mail, a carrier inserts mail pieces into the compartments (pigeonholes) of a casing box; each compartment identifies one or more delivery stops on the carrier's route. After casing is completed and the mail is removed from the compartments and bundled, the carrier can begin to deliver the mail (delivery time). According to the Service, a letter carrier's work assignment (in this case, readying mail for delivery and delivering it) should be as close to 8 hours a day as possible.

GAO'S MAY 1985 REPORT

Our May 15, 1985, report Mail Delivery Procedures in White Plains, New York focused on one carrier route, but the late mail delivery problem the report discusses applied to all of White Plains. We reported that letter carriers on many White Plains routes generally required nearly 1 to 2 hours of additional time to case mail because mail volume had grown so large. As a result, the carriers were leaving the post office 1 to 2 hours later than scheduled, and businesses and households were receiving their mail 1 to 2 hours later than they otherwise would.

We reported that the White Plains Post Office, in early fiscal year 1985, had obtained permission to hire additional carriers to help case mail and that these carriers would each

⁴An operating plan documents the processes to be performed, target times to be met, and supervisory responsibilities to be exercised for a post office to achieve its processing and service standards.

learn how to case several different routes and move from route to route as needed. We reported that local Service officials said the additional casing help should

--enable all carriers to regularly leave the post office by 9:30 a.m. and

--bring overtime use within normal limits.

Finally, we reported that a local Service official said the White Plains Post Office would consider whether to adjust some routes if the additional casing assistance did not bring departure times back to normal. (Approval of the Westchester Management Sectional Center would be needed in such cases.)

CASING ASSISTANCE PROVIDED BUT
LATE DEPARTURES CONTINUE

To combat high overtime use and late departures, the White Plains Post Office hired 13 additional carriers between May 1985 and September 1985 and implemented what the Service calls the "router" program. Under this program, casing assistance is provided to carriers whose routes regularly take longer than 8 hours to case and deliver. The 13 additional carriers enabled the post office to reach its authorized level of 135 letter carriers and to staff the router program.

In May 1985, the White Plains Post Office implemented its router program with seven experienced carriers and an experienced supervisor. (Seven new carriers took over the former work responsibilities of the experienced carriers.) The 7 carriers, now called "routers," provide casing assistance to 33 different routes, with each router assigned 4 or 5 routes. The routers, who start casing several hours before the letter carriers arrive, work from 1:00 a.m. to 9:30 a.m. and, before each night's work and during the working hours, their supervisor determines how much casing assistance each of the 33 routes needs and how much assistance has been provided. The supervisor also receives information from the carriers' supervisors as to which of the 33 routes should receive assistance.

The additional carriers and the router program have had a positive impact in reducing carrier overtime and improving carrier departure times. Nevertheless, overtime use remains far above the White Plains Post Office's goal and carriers are still frequently--and often substantially--late in starting their deliveries each day. Overtime dropped from about 14 percent of total carrier workhours through March 15 of fiscal year 1985 to approximately 11 percent through March 14 of fiscal year 1986. (The post office's goal is to reduce carrier overtime to 5 percent or less of total carrier workhours.) According to the White Plains Post Office's Customer Services Manager, the router

program enabled carriers on many of the 33 routes to cut their departure times by 30 to 60 minutes. (They previously left 1 to 2 hours late; they are now leaving 30 to 60 minutes late.) On the remainder of the 33 routes, the program kept departure times from becoming even later.

Late departures continued because the amount of mail the White Plains Post Office delivered continued to grow substantially. During fiscal year 1984, the post office delivered approximately 378,000 feet of mail,⁵ which was nearly 23 percent more than the volume delivered in 1983. During fiscal year 1985, the post office delivered about 448,000 feet of mail, which was almost 19 percent more than in 1984. Mail volume is still growing; the post office delivered about 21 percent more mail during about the first 4 months of fiscal year 1986 than it did during about the first 4 months of fiscal year 1985.

FURTHER PROPOSALS TO ELIMINATE LATE CARRIER DEPARTURES

We and the White Plains Post Office have proposed other actions aimed at getting carriers back on schedule. Our proposal concerned the transportation of mail from the Westchester Management Sectional Center to the post office. The post office's proposal concerns, in large measure, the router program and how routers could provide delivery assistance as well as more casing assistance.

Revising the transportation schedule

Much of the mail the White Plains Post Office delivers is handled or processed by the Westchester Management Sectional Center, which is a large mail processing facility located roughly 30 minutes to 45 minutes away from the White Plains Post Office. The sectional center sorts and routes mail to post offices within its service area, and these offices then deliver the mail. The sectional center trucks mail to White Plains at scheduled intervals throughout the day, but the largest volume is transported between midnight and 6:25 a.m. when the center is the busiest.

After the mail arrives, the White Plains Post Office's mail processing unit sorts it to the 72 carrier routes in White

⁵About 238 pieces of mail are contained in a foot of mail at the White Plains Post Office. The mail pieces include all types of mail (for example, First-Class letters, second-class magazines, third-class advertising) except parcels and small rolls such as tubes and sleeve-wrapped newspapers and catalogs.

Plains. The sorting is performed by employees who have memorized the addresses in White Plains and the route number for each address. (Some of the employees sort mail by reading addresses, recalling related route numbers, and then striking appropriate keys on a letter sorting machine while others do so by inserting mail into the compartments of a case-like box.) The processing unit does the bulk of its work from midnight to 8:30 a.m. and, throughout this period, mail that the unit sorts is taken to the carriers' cases for subsequent casing.

Past surveys made by the White Plains Post Office suggest that 20 to 30 percent of a day's mail from the sectional center frequently arrives on the 6:25 a.m. truck. (This truck is the sectional center's last scheduled delivery of mail that carriers will deliver that day.) Local Service officials said that large a volume at that hour strains sorting and casing operations. The officials explained that the mail processing unit takes longer than the available 1 hour and 50 minutes to sort that large a volume (the unit is supposed to finish sorting by 8:15 a.m.). Because the unit misses its deadline, the carriers receive mail after 8:15 a.m. to case, which causes them to miss their scheduled departure times (9:00 a.m. to 9:30 a.m.).⁶

To get more mail to White Plains before 6:25 a.m., we suggested to sectional center officials that they add two additional trips to White Plains, one with an arrival time of 3:30 a.m. and the other with an arrival time of 5:30 a.m. The officials agreed to do so on a test basis, and the test began in mid-January 1986. During the test period, enough mail was available at the sectional center to reasonably fill the additional trucks, and the White Plains mail processing unit was finishing sooner because it was receiving more mail earlier to sort. However, sectional center officials determined that the two additional trips would increase transportation costs by about \$50,000 annually and, at that cost, would be too expensive to continue. They dropped the two trips but revised the transportation schedule--effective March 22, 1986--to reach the same objective (more mail to White Plains sooner). That part of

⁶According to local Service officials, the 8:15 a.m. schedule finishing time for sorting mail to carrier routes is predicated on the 6:25 a.m. truck carrying no more than 16 percent of a day's volume from the sectional center. The current percentage, we believe, is not only higher (frequently 20 to 30 percent) but of a much larger base. Therefore many more pieces of mail must be sorted and cased. Because the overall volume has grown, more mail than before is undoubtedly arriving before 6:25 a.m. as well. This means the mail processing unit and carriers have many more mail pieces to sort but not more hours in which to do the sorting.

the transportation schedule that was revised in March, the mid-January revision, and the "original" schedule follow.

Arrival Times in White Plains

<u>Original</u>	<u>Revised Jan. 1986</u>	<u>Revised Mar. 1986</u>
12:50 a.m.	12:50 a.m.	1:00 a.m.
2:45 a.m.	2:30 a.m.	-
-	3:30 a.m.	3:10 a.m.
4:30 a.m.	4:30 a.m.	4:45 a.m.
-	5:30 a.m.	-
6:25 a.m.	6:25 a.m.	6:00 a.m.

Expanding the router program

The White Plains Post Office submitted a proposal to sectional center officials in late February 1986 to (1) expand and intensify the casing assistance routers provide and (2) use routers to help carriers deliver mail. The proposal's intent is to eliminate late mail delivery. According to the post office's Customer Services Manager, the proposed expansion and intensification would:

- Reduce each router's workload to no more than three carrier routes. (This would enable routers to provide more--longer--assistance to their assigned routes. The current routers each provide assistance to four or five routes.)
- Provide casing assistance to more than the 33 routes now receiving such help.
- Increase the number of routers in order to accomplish the two preceding objectives.

The manager estimated that 18 additional routers would be needed, and they would come from the post office's current complement of carriers (for example, the work schedules of part-time carriers would be arranged to provide router assistance).

Under the post office's proposal, routers would help carriers deliver mail, we understand, in two ways. One or the other would be used depending on the route.

- A carrier would start delivering mail before casing is completed. (Casing would not delay the carrier's departure from the post office.) A router would finish casing and then take the just-cased mail to pick-up points along the route. The carrier, upon reaching those points, would pick up the mail and deliver it along with the mail with which he or she left the office.

--A carrier would leave the post office by 8:30 a.m. with mail for the first half of the route. A router would finish whatever casing remained and then deliver the second half of the route. (Casing would not delay the carrier and the router would deliver the second half of the route before the carrier could deliver it.)

The White Plains Post Office's Customer Services Manager said delivery assistance is not needed for all of the routes in White Plains. It would be provided, according to the manager, only to routes where the carriers are having the greatest difficulty leaving the post office on schedule.

Under either of the two approaches, delivery of some mail would probably not occur until the next day, which is generally contrary to Service policy. Casing would not be completed until after carriers left the post office, and mail cased after they leave can be addressed to any delivery stop on their routes. Under the first approach, by the time the carriers receive this mail, they will have completed delivery to some portion of their routes. Under the second approach, the router would finish casing mail for the first half of the route (which the carrier delivers) after the carrier leaves the post office. Unless the post office makes a special effort to "backtrack" to those portions already covered, mail going there but cased after carriers left the post office could not be delivered until the next delivery day.

The post office's proposal contained several other suggestions such as:

--Having the mail processing unit start each workday earlier and finish sorting by 7:30 a.m. rather than the currently scheduled 8:15 a.m. (We believe the revised--March 1986--transportation schedule would have an effect on the feasibility of this proposal. The White Plains Post Office must receive mail early enough to finish sorting by 7:30 a.m.)

--Having carriers on routes with many businesses start their workday earlier and leave the post office between 8:30 a.m. and 9:00 a.m. rather than the currently scheduled 9:00 a.m. to 9:30 a.m. (The ability of the mail processing unit to finish sorting by 7:30 a.m. would affect this proposal.)

As of March 26, 1986, sectional center officials had not given the post office permission to implement the proposal.

Territorial route adjustments

As we reported in May 1985, the White Plains Post Office's Customer Services Manager raised the possibility of adjusting

some routes in White Plains if the router program failed to return carrier departure times to normal. Routes are adjusted territorially by reassigning delivery stops to create new routes and/or make existing routes shorter or longer. The purpose of such adjustments is to equalize the workload among routes. (The goal is to make a carrier's assignment consist of as nearly 8 hours of daily work as possible. Assistance, such as from routers, can be used to hold the carrier's workload to 8 hours.)

Certain reviews conducted by the White Plains Post Office indicate a need for route adjustments. Although White Plains postal officials apparently lean towards such adjustments as indicated in the post office's proposal to the sectional center, these adjustments are likely to occur only as a last resort. Local and national Service officials offer a number of reasons for this position. For example, the task of examining and realigning routes is costly, and no corps of trained and experienced route examiners are available in the area served by the Westchester sectional center. If route adjustments were made, mail processing and delivery operations would be greatly disrupted until mail sorters and carriers fully learned the adjustments. (According to an official from the Service's national office, mail processing and carrier operations should return to normal within about 3 to 6 months following a major adjustment effort.) During the learning process, mail service would be less accurate (mail directed to wrong routes) and slower (which means later delivery).

Still, territorial route adjustments have been used as a means of getting carriers out of the post office on schedule. The Fremont, California, Post Office did this. The Fremont Post Office--like White Plains--was experiencing significant mail volume growth, high overtime use among carriers, and late departures (carriers leaving past schedule).⁷ Fremont implemented a router program which, according to the Fremont postmaster, reduced overtime but did not eliminate late departures. It next made territorial route adjustments. The Fremont postmaster said the adjustments, together with the router program, reduced overtime and stopped late departures. He added, however, that late departures are beginning to appear again because Fremont continues to grow (more people, more businesses). Further route adjustments of a minor nature, he said, may be necessary.

⁷We issued a report concerning workload and overtime at the Fremont Post Office: Letter Carriers' Workload And Overtime Concerns At Irvington Station, Fremont, California (GAO/GGD-85-39, Apr. 15, 1985).

AGENCY COMMENTS

On May 2, 1986, in commenting on a draft of this report, the Postmaster General said the report accurately reflects the late delivery problems the Service has been having in White Plains because of the growth in mail volume there. The Service, he said, has a team in White Plains concentrating on the main office's 17 business routes as well as addressing carrier leaving time, distribution cutoff time, and other issues discussed in the report. The beneficial effects of the team's work, the Postmaster General said, should begin to be felt on the 17 routes in about a month. The remaining routes in White Plains will be covered after the 17 business routes, according to the Postmaster General.

We spoke with the local Service official responsible for the review team's efforts and he said the team's objective is to be able to deliver mail by noon to most businesses on the 17 routes, starting in June 1986. This would be accomplished by making changes in mail processing and delivery operations; for example, by possibly decreasing the amount of mail routers and carriers have to case directly. (However, unlike the two proposed approaches presented on pp. 9 and 10 in which some mail would probably not have been delivered until the "next" day, all of the mail that the White Plains Post Office receives from the Westchester Management Sectional Center on the "last"--6:00 a.m.--truck and earlier trucks will be delivered that day, according to the local Service official.) Other review teams will then examine the other routes in White Plains with the intent of improving delivery times.

The Postmaster General's letter to us is appendix II.



THE POSTMASTER GENERAL
Washington, DC 20280-0010

May 2, 1986

Dear Mr. Mitchell:

This refers to your draft report "Late Delivery in White Plains, New York."

The report accurately reflects the late delivery problems we have been having in White Plains because of the office's growth in mail volume--23 percent in 1984 and another 19 percent in 1985.

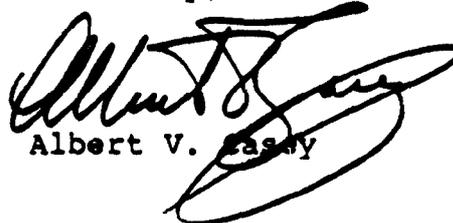
As promised, we have made transportation changes and staffing additions, and these measures have advanced the delivery time on some routes. Further actions are under way.

We have a team in White Plains now that is concentrating on the main office's 17 business routes, but also addressing carrier leaving time, distribution cutoff time, and other issues discussed in the report. The beneficial effects of their work should begin to be felt on the business routes in about a month. Our Headquarters Delivery Services Department and regional management will be following up on this effort. Then the remaining routes at the main office and at the office's two stations will be covered.

We are also arranging a briefing and facility tour for the Westchester Chamber of Commerce to explain what we are doing to improve service. We are determined that our delivery standards will be met in White Plains.

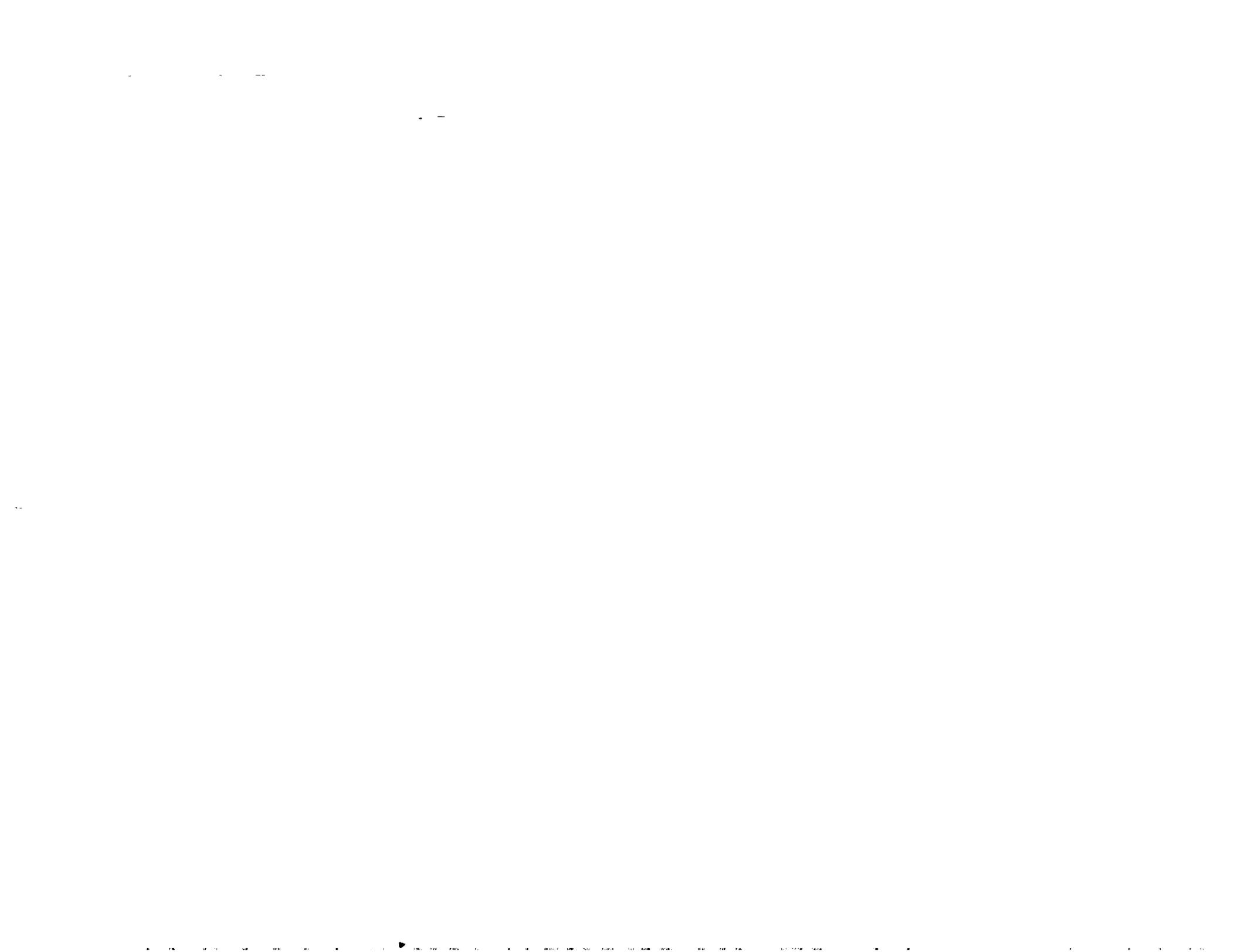
Thank you for the opportunity to comment on your report.

Sincerely,



Albert V. Cassey

Mr. James G. Mitchell
Senior Associate Director
General Government Division
U.S. General Accounting Office
Washington, DC 20548-0001



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