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STATEMENT OF
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GENERAL GOVERNMENT PROGRAMS
BEFORE THE
SUBCOMMITTEE ON POSTAL PERSONNEL AND MODERNIZATION
COMMITTEE ON POST OFFICE AND CIVIL SERVICE
HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
ON
SAFETY PROCEDURES
AT THE LOS ANGELES
BULK MAIL CENTER



03-682

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee:

We are pleased to be here today to discuss the results of our review of the Los Angeles Bulk Mail Center's safety program. The Center, which has a workforce of between 900 and 1,000 employees, is among the busiest of the Postal Service's 21 bulk mail distribution centers. The Center's safety program is part of a Service-wide program for ensuring the occupational health and safety of postal employees.

As you are aware, Chairman Ford (House Committee on Post Office and Civil Service) asked us to review the Center's safety program after the Subcommittee on Postal Personnel and Modernization had visited the Center and learned of employees' concerns. Our review, which we performed from June 1985 to March 1986, covered the Center's administration of its safety program and focused on its compliance with the requirements of the Service-wide program. We did not assess the effect of any noncompliance on the Center's accident record nor did we compare the Center's safety program with the safety program at other bulk mail centers.

In summary, we found that the Los Angeles Bulk Mail Center

- had not fully implemented the Service-wide program in the areas of operating safety committees and providing employees with appropriate safety training;
- required employees, when injured, to review a packet of medical and return-to-work forms and instructions before sending them to a medical facility;

- had not clearly informed employees of who will pay for medical treatment; and
- had not used data from all accidents and injuries to establish and monitor local safety goals.

Safety committees

The Service-wide safety program requires facility managers to establish two safety committees--one composed of facility managers and the other composed of managers and employee representatives. A primary responsibility of the management safety committee is to develop and implement objectives to improve the facility's safety program while the responsibility of the joint labor-management safety committee is to assist the facility, in an advisory capacity, to implement an effective safety program.

The Center has established the two safety committees but the committees were not operating within Service-wide guidelines. For example, the management safety committee was meeting on an irregular basis rather than at least once every other month as the instructions require, and members of the joint labor-management safety committee had not received the specific training the Service developed for committee members nationwide.

Safety training

Formal remedial training (classroom instructions, films, self-administered tests), which is intended to correct improper

work practices after an accident occurs, was provided to 3 employees who were involved in accidents in fiscal year 1985, and the formal training that was provided was, for at least 2 of the 3 cases, unrelated to the injuries the employees sustained. The Center also relied on line supervisors to provide remedial training; they are generally supposed to provide such training during weekly safety talks. However, all 15 of the employees we interviewed who were injured on the job said they had not been told of ways to prevent recurrence of those injuries.

Procedures for dealing with injuries

Employees injured at the Center can receive treatment at a private medical clinic located less than 1 mile away--the Center has contracted with the clinic for medical services--or from their personal physicians. The Center generally requires injured employees to review and complete a packet of medical and return-to-work forms and instructions before leaving the Center to receive treatment. The review is intended to educate the injured employee on the procedures to follow in obtaining treatment and in returning to work.

We do not question the necessity for the forms and instructions but we do question the timing of the employee's review. The timing, we believe, causes supervisors to make medical decisions in that they must decide whether the nature and consequences of the injury preclude the employee from reviewing the packet before going for treatment and also causes delays in getting injured employees to medical professionals.

The case of an employee we interviewed illustrates the risk associated with the review's timing. The employee was experiencing chest pains but could not leave the Center for medical attention until after his supervisor and another supervisor conferred and decided that the employee did not have to review the packet. The consequences could have been disastrous if the employee's chest pains had turned out to be the heart attack the employee thought he was having rather than the rib and chest cartilage injury doctors subsequently diagnosed.

Line supervisors also decide whether an injured employee should be driven to the treatment facility. We interviewed 15 employees who were injured on the job and, in at least two cases, the employees drove themselves to the clinic even though their injuries seemingly could have impaired their driving ability. One employee was the person who was experiencing chest pains; the second employee had gotten a chemical on his face and in his left eye. Both employees said the Center did not offer to drive them.

Standards for determining the Center's safety record

The Center recorded 137 accidents in fiscal year 1985 and most involved injuries. The seriousness of the injuries ranged from those for which employees sought no treatment to those requiring treatment by a physician.

The Center records all reported accidents and, following certain government-wide and Service-wide reporting criteria,

submits data on certain of these accidents to the Service's national office. This data is then used to establish the Center's official safety record and safety goals.

According to the Center's accident log for fiscal year 1985, data on 44 of the 137 recorded accidents was sent to the Service's national office. Although the number of accidents the Center must report to Service headquarters can be small relative to the total accidents that occur at the Center, the Center does not use the data from all accidents to set its own local goals and to measure progress towards those goals, or to evaluate the effectiveness of safety training. We believe the Center should use data from all accidents to establish its own safety goals, in addition to responding to the goals established from nationally reported data.

Recommendations

We prepared a report on what we found at the Center. In our report, we are recommending that the Postmaster General direct the Center's manager to

- take the necessary actions to ensure that the Center fully implements the Service-wide safety program,
- ensure that all injured employees are sent for medical treatment without first reviewing an injury packet and are provided transportation to the clinic (or whatever medical facility is appropriate),

- provide employees with information on who pays for medical treatment and the procedures employees must follow to ensure payment and reimbursement, and
- use data from all accidents and injuries to establish local safety goals, measure progress towards those goals, and better define training needs.

In commenting on our recommendations, the Service said actions were underway to fully implement the Service-wide safety program at the Center. The Service said further that Center employees will be clearly informed of their right to be treated by their personal physicians and that payment for such treatment will be provided. For the remaining recommendations concerning the review of injury packets and the setting of local safety goals, the Service said, in effect, that its national Office of Safety and Health will visit the Center to determine first-hand the extent to which the recommendations should be implemented.

This concludes my statement, Mr. Chairman. We will be happy to answer any questions you may have.