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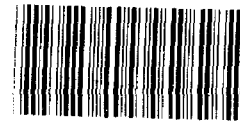
GAO

Report to Congressional Requesters

June 1988

POSTAL SERVICE

How the Postal Service Dealt With the Edmond, Oklahoma, Tragedy



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042463/136100

GAO/GGD-88-78



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

General Government Division

B-229392

June 16, 1988

The Honorable Mickey Leland
Chairman, Subcommittee on Postal
Operations and Services
Committee on Post Office and
Civil Service
House of Representatives

The Honorable Frank McCloskey
Chairman, Subcommittee on Postal
Personnel and Modernization
Committee on Post Office and
Civil Service
House of Representatives

The Honorable Frank Horton
Ranking Minority Member
Subcommittee on Postal Operations
and Services
Committee on Post Office and
Civil Service
House of Representatives

This report responds to your request that we review how the Postal Service dealt with the Edmond, Oklahoma, tragedy.

To be better prepared for traumatic events should they occur in the future, both the Postal Service and the Department of Labor's Office of Workers' Compensation Programs will develop contingency plans. The report will assist these efforts by providing principles of crisis management that have been developed by both public and private sector organizations for dealing with the effects of traumatic events and disasters on their operations, employees, and customers.

As arranged with the Subcommittees, we are sending copies of this report to the Postmaster General; the Secretary of Labor; the Director, Office of Personnel Management; and other interested parties.

Richard L. Fogel
Assistant Comptroller General

Executive Summary

Purpose

On August 20, 1986, an Edmond, Oklahoma, postal employee shot to death 14 of his co-workers, wounded 6 others, and then took his own life. The Subcommittees on Postal Operations and Services and Postal Personnel and Modernization, Committee on Post Office and Civil Service, House of Representatives, held a joint hearing on March 18, 1987, to hear concerns and complaints from the victims' families and surviving employees regarding the Postal Service's overall management of the tragedy's aftermath.

As a result of the hearings, the Chairmen of the Subcommittees and the Ranking Minority Member of the Subcommittee on Postal Operations and Services asked GAO to review the Postal Service's post-tragedy response to the Edmond tragedy.

Background

Immediately following the tragedy, the Postal Service had to improvise solutions to numerous problems, including assisting victims' families in obtaining their entitled compensation and dealing with the traumatic effects of the tragedy on the employees, the victims' families, and operations of the Edmond Post Office.

A family spokesperson said at the hearing that the Postal Service promised the victims' families that it would take care of everything in the immediate aftermath of the tragedy. However, federal agencies other than the Postal Service are responsible for administering the entitlement programs that compensate victims' families for life insurance, burial expenses, and survivor annuities. Payments by these agencies are governed by federal laws and regulations and various agency internal controls to assure proper payment.

According to statements made at the hearing, some of the families felt that the Postal Service did not provide them the promised assistance in obtaining their benefits. Also said at the hearing was that insensitive handling of the aftermath by the Postal Service caused the families additional anguish.

GAO did not interview the victims' families or surviving employees. Thus, the criticisms expressed at the congressional hearing may not be representative of the views of all the victims' families and employees.

Results in Brief

The Postal Service organized immediate assistance to the victims' families in preparing and submitting the necessary initial documents to

obtain benefits such as life insurance, burial benefits, and unpaid compensation. As a result, the families were paid most of their lump sum entitlement within 45 days of the tragedy. Because of concerns about infringing on the families' privacy, the Postal Service did not initiate follow-up actions to find out if families needed additional help in getting all of their benefits. The decision to let the families seek out for themselves follow-up assistance led to some families becoming frustrated with the continuous flow of paperwork and the time required to obtain all their benefits.

Working with state and local agencies, the Postal Service arranged immediate crisis intervention assistance and contracted with specialized health care providers to make long-term counseling services available to all employees and the victims' families. The Postal Service did not have preplanned crisis management procedures for managing the aftermath of tragic events which affect both employees and customers.

Principal Findings

Initial Assistance to Families and Employees Was Noteworthy

The Postal Service assembled teams to assist the victims' families in preparing and submitting the initial documents required to obtain their entitled financial benefits from four federal agencies. These initial efforts contributed to 13 of the 14 victims' families receiving 90 percent or more of their entitled lump sum benefits (i.e., life insurance and burial expense payments) within 45 days of the tragedy. Seven of the 10 families eligible for a monthly annuity received their first check within 60 days. Lump sum payments ranged from about \$64,000 to about \$221,000. (See p. 13.)

Immediate counseling assistance was provided to employees and the victims' families by crisis team personnel from the National Organization for Victim Assistance, counselors from a community mental health facility, and volunteers from a local ministerial support center. The Postal Service subsequently contracted with a health care organization and private practitioners for long-term counseling for the families and employees.

Initial Assistance Not Followed Up

Unlike the initial assistance, however, management of the aftermath did not continue as an organizational effort involving the Postal Service headquarters and regional office. The management of the aftermath was left with employees of the Service's Oklahoma City Division Office and the Edmond Post Office. The Postal Service provided no guidance on what more should be done to help the families get their financial benefits or to help the Postmaster and the surviving employees cope with the post-trauma effects of the tragedy.

The Oklahoma City Division, which normally processes benefits for the Edmond Post Office employees, decided that it would assist the families only in response to a request. The Division's Human Resource Manager said the families were not contacted to see if they needed further assistance or whether they were receiving their benefit payments because it was believed that such contacts would infringe on the families' privacy during a time of grief. Subsequent criticism of the handling of the tragedy can be traced to this decision.

At the congressional hearing, a family representative said that the families felt the Postal Service delivered much less than it promised and was unresponsive to the families' requests for further assistance.

The Postmaster General, in commenting at the congressional hearing on how the families were assisted, seemed to accept the validity of some of the criticism. He said "what may have happened is that we dropped the ball somewhere between September 1st and the end of the year."

GAO examined records showing that postal officials responded to the families' requests for assistance in obtaining or explaining benefit payments. Neither the requests nor the responses were sufficiently documented to enable GAO to judge responsiveness.

The victims' families were entitled to a variety of benefits from four federal agencies other than the Postal Service. Payments had to be supported by completed claim forms and documents and for some benefits, the lack of effective follow-up contributed to the time required to obtain documentation and to make payments. (See pp. 15 to 18.)

Crisis Management

While the Edmond tragedy was an event unprecedented in the Postal Service, organizations in both the public and private sectors have experienced sudden traumatic circumstances from a variety of causes or have anticipated the possibility of such events. (See p. 23.) There is a

growing body of literature on the topic showing that a number of private companies and government agencies have developed formal crisis management plans. GAO's review of the literature (see bibliography on p. 36) showed that there are several models for dealing with a crisis situation. The models vary depending on the nature of disasters to which an organization could be exposed, but they all share a common philosophy that action in emergencies is seldom effective unless planned in advance. Relevant principles of crisis management planning are listed in chapter 4. (See p. 25.)

The Postal Service has contingency plans to restore operations after natural disasters or during work stoppages, but the plans do not address the effects of human trauma that can result from disasters. As a result of the complaints about how the aftermath of the Edmond tragedy was managed, the Postmaster General directed that preparations be made for a better response to traumatic events should they occur in the future. (See p. 25.)

Recommendation

GAO recommends that the Postmaster General ensure that the contingency plan being prepared by the Assistant Postmaster General includes principles of crisis management developed by organizations in both the public and private sectors that deal with the effects of traumatic events and disasters on their operations, employees, and customers.

Agency Comments

The Postal Service accepted GAO's findings and the contingency plan being developed will include the principles of crisis management as outlined in this report. (See p. 26.)

The Department of Labor said that it too will develop a written plan that will include active assistance to potential claimants to ensure that they claim and receive benefits to which they are entitled. (See p. 26.)

The Office of Personnel Management chose not to comment on GAO's draft report.

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Abbreviations

NFPA	National Fire Protection Association
NOVA	National Organization For Victim Assistance
OPM	Office of Personnel Management
OSHA	Occupational Health and Safety Administration
OWCP	Office of Workers' Compensation Programs
SSA	Social Security Administration
USPS	U.S. Postal Service
VA	Veterans Administration

Introduction

On August 20, 1986, an employee of the Edmond, Oklahoma, Post Office shot to death 14 of his co-workers, wounded 6 others, and then took his own life. The tragedy was the third worst mass murder in U.S. history. In its aftermath, postal employees had to perform numerous and varied tasks resulting from the tragedy while continuing the operations of the Edmond Post Office.

On March 18, 1987, the Subcommittees on Postal Operations and Services and Postal Personnel and Modernization, Committee on Post Office and Civil Service, House of Representatives, held a joint hearing to review the Postal Service's post-tragedy response to the Edmond tragedy. During the hearing, a spokesperson for the families and representatives of the Edmond employees criticized how the Postal Service responded to their personal needs and circumstances. The criticisms included the following:

- The Postal Service did not adequately explain benefit entitlements or adequately assist in obtaining the benefits.
- The Postal Service did not ensure that benefits were paid in a timely manner and without error.
- The Edmond Postmaster imposed work-related restrictions on the employees and made statements after the tragedy that some employees considered insensitive.
- Safety deficiencies involving exits from the Edmond Post Office may have contributed to the severity of the disaster.

Objectives, Scope, and Methodology

On the day following the oversight hearings, we were asked to review the Postal Service's response during the 7-month post-tragedy period (see app. I). As agreed with the Subcommittee on Postal Operations and Services, our objectives were to answer the following questions:

- How effectively did the Postal Service organize to ensure that benefits were correctly and promptly paid to the victims' families and surviving employees? (See chap. 2.)
- What policies and procedures did the Postal Service implement to provide counseling services to the victims' families, surviving employees, and the Edmond Post Office management? (See chap. 3.)
- Does the Postal Service have adequate contingency planning for crisis events such as the Edmond tragedy? (See chap. 4.)
- What is the status of the Postal Service's efforts to correct servicewide deficiencies with building exits similar to those identified at the Edmond Post Office? (See app. II.)

To answer the questions, we did work at the Postal Service's headquarters, Washington, D.C.; Southern Region Office, Memphis, Tennessee; Division Office, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma; and at the Edmond Post Office, Edmond, Oklahoma. We also did work at the Office of Personnel Management (OPM) headquarters, Washington, D.C.; Office of Workers' Compensation Programs (OWCP) in Washington, D.C., and Dallas, Texas; and the Social Security Administration (SSA) in Oklahoma City. At the locations visited, we interviewed responsible personnel and obtained copies of pertinent documents. As agreed with the Subcommittees, we did not interview any of the victims' families or Edmond Postal Service employees who were involved in the tragedy, with the exception of the former Edmond Postmaster. We did our field work between June and September 1987.

To answer the question on benefits, we reviewed case files maintained by the Postal Service as well as the federal agencies responsible for making benefit payments. We obtained information from these case files showing the dates when benefit claims were prepared, submitted, adjudicated, authorized, and paid. Benefit processing steps were explained to us by program managers and staff.

To describe the policies and procedures the Postal Service implemented to provide counseling to employees and families, we interviewed responsible Postal Service officials, National Organization For Victim Assistance (NOVA) members, the counselor responsible for providing most of the counseling to the victims' families and surviving employees, and a representative of the Oklahoma Department of Mental Health.

To respond to the concern about the adequacy of planning, we researched literature and we talked to people in the public and private sector about existing public and private crisis management plans. We also interviewed the Assistant Postmaster General for Employee Relations, who had been asked by the Postmaster General to develop a plan for crisis events such as the Edmond tragedy.

To determine the status of the Postal Service's efforts to identify and correct exit deficiencies similar to those found at the Edmond Post Office, we (1) identified the safety standard guidelines used to conduct the special safety inspections, (2) determined the scope of the inspections, and (3) determined the number of safety deficiencies found by the special inspections and the Postal Service's plan to correct identified deficiencies. We did not review and assess the adequacy of the Postal

Service's overall safety program or the results of prior years' safety inspections.

Because we did not interview the victims' families or surviving employees, we were not able to determine whether the criticisms expressed at the congressional hearing were representative of the views of all the victims' families and employees. Neither could we determine the actual date the families received their benefit payments. We used the dates when benefit payment checks were issued or authorized as the dates when payments were made. Further, any statements attributed to the victims' families or employees are based on the hearing's record unless otherwise stated. Our review was made in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards.

Survivor Benefit Programs

In the aftermath of the Edmond shootings, the Postal Service recognized and publicly expressed an immediate obligation to assist the families of the 14 Postal Service employees who were killed. The team of benefit specialists assembled by the Postal Service initiated application and coordination processes that resulted in 13 of the 14 families receiving at least 90 percent of their lump sum benefits within 45 days of the tragedy, and 7 of the 10 monthly annuities were started within 60 days. However, benefit payment time frames varied substantially by type and family. Several families expressed the view that more assistance was required to meet the expectations raised in the immediate aftermath of the tragedy. Four federal agencies, in addition to the Postal Service, were responsible for authorizing and paying benefits to the victims' families.

Benefit Programs

Families (e.g., spouses, children, or next of kin) of Postal Service employees who are killed in the performance of duty are entitled to a variety of benefits from several programs. We categorized benefits as either lump sum (one-time payments) or annuity payments (a payment usually made on a continuing monthly basis). These programs and the federal agencies that administer them are:

- Federal Employees Group Life Insurance. The life insurance program is administered by OPM. It provides a cash settlement to designated beneficiaries upon the death of a covered employee. Beneficiaries may receive the settlement in installments or in a lump sum.
- Civil Service Retirement System. The retirement program, administered by OPM, provides a monthly annuity to eligible beneficiaries. If a beneficiary is not entitled to an annuity or elects the alternative to an annuity under the Federal Employees Compensation Act, he or she receives a lump sum refund of the deceased employee's contribution to the retirement system.
- Federal Employees Compensation Act. The death and disability programs are administered by the Department of Labor's OWCP. The act provides for a \$200 administrative payment and up to an \$800 burial expense payment to designated beneficiaries. In addition, eligible spouses and minor children (up to age 23 if a full-time student) are entitled to receive a monthly annuity.
- Social Security Benefits. The death benefits and survivor annuities are administered by SSA, Department of Health and Human Services. This program provides for a \$255 lump sum death benefit payment to an eligible survivor. In addition, dependents who meet certain eligibility requirements can receive monthly Social Security annuities.

- Veterans Administration Benefits. Death benefits for the victims who were veterans are administered by the Veterans Administration (VA). This program provides for a lump sum payment on the death of an eligible employee. An amount not to exceed \$250 will be paid toward the veteran's basic burial costs. In addition, a payment not to exceed \$150 will be paid for a cemetery plot or interment allowance when the veteran is not buried in a national or other U.S. Government cemetery.
- Unpaid Compensation. Unpaid compensation is wages/salary and the monetary value of vacation time that the deceased employee earned but had not received. Unpaid compensation is not actually a benefit program, but we considered it equivalent to one because the employing agency pays the amount due to the deceased employee's designated beneficiary or next of kin.

Payment Times for Lump Sum Benefits and Monthly Annuities

Lump sum payments to the 14 families ranged from about \$64,000 to about \$221,000. Eleven of the 14 families received from about 91 to 99 percent of their total entitled lump sum benefits within 30 days of the tragedy. The other three families received about 78, 93, and 94 percent of their total lump sum benefits within 45 days of the tragedy. Table 2.1 shows the percentage of total lump sum benefits received by each family and the days elapsed between the tragedy and payment.

Table 2.1: Percentage of Lump Sum Payments Paid by Days Elapsed

Families	30 days	45 days	60 days	120 days	270 days
1	99.15	99.44	99.44	99.94	100
2	1.32	93.14	93.14	93.14	100
3	1.36	93.50	93.50	94.08	100
4	99.41	100.00	100.00	100.00	100
5	99.26	99.84	100.00	100.00	100
6	94.42	95.11	95.11	100.00	100
7	91.41	91.82	91.82	100.00	100
8	99.21	99.33	99.53	99.91	100
9	96.65	96.75	97.04	99.57	100
10	99.16	99.16	99.16	99.64	100
11	77.63	77.63	77.63	78.35	100
12	92.11	95.34	95.34	100.00	100
13	97.01	97.01	97.01	97.01	100
14	96.29	96.74	96.74	100.00	100

Benefit payment time frames varied substantially by type and family ranging from 14 to 261 days for lump sum payments and from 20 to 114

days for the first monthly annuity payments. Seven of the 10 families eligible for a monthly annuity received their first check within 60 days.

Table 2.2 shows the number of days that passed between the date of the tragedy and the date the different lump sum benefit payments were issued or authorized to each family. Because we sorted each type of benefit payment in ascending order, the table cannot be used to determine how timely each family received their total benefit payments.

Table 2.2: Days Elapsed for Lump Sum Payments

OPM life insurance	OPM retirement refunds	OWCP admin. expense	OWCP burial expense	SSA death benefit	USPS unpaid comp.	VA death benefit
15	35	30	37	19	14	21
15	49	30	44	20	14	22
15	57	30	44	21	14	30
15	63	30	44	21	14	NA ^a
15	64	30	44	26	14	NA
15	68	30	44	29	14	NA
15	110	37	72	29	14	NA
15	119	37	79	29	14	NA
16	153	37	79	40	14	NA
21	154	37	79	NA ^a	14	NA
26	154	37	155	NA	14	NA
26	196	37	156	NA	14	NA
34	196	44	156	NA	14	NA
34	205	261	261	NA	26	NA

^aNA: Not applicable. Five families were not eligible for Social Security death benefit payments and 11 families were not eligible for VA death benefits.

As the table shows, the OWCP payments for burial expenses and OPM refunds of employee retirement contributions required the longest time to process. Explanations follow.

OWCP Payments for Burial Expenses

The Federal Employees Compensation Act provides for payment of burial expenses up to a maximum of \$800 when a federal employee is killed in the performance of duty. OWCP's procedures manual provides that payment can be made (1) to a survivor (e.g., spouse) if he or she provides proof of prior payment, (2) to the executor of the estate if burial expenses have not been paid, or (3) to the funeral director if no legal representative has been appointed and the bill is unpaid. OWCP's instructions for obtaining this benefit, however, are not clear.

OWCP's claim form instructions state:

"Submit original itemized funeral and burial bills. If paid, so indicate and give name and address of person making payment. If an Administrator or Executor has been appointed, give such person's name and address and attach a copy of the appointment document."

Nine families submitted itemized funeral and burial bills, but were subsequently informed by OWCP that they had to provide additional documentation to support their entitlement to the \$800. They had to provide either an official copy of the appointment document showing the duly appointed executor or administrator of the decedent's estate, or an OWCP form completed by the undertaker showing the amount of unpaid burial expenses. The additional documentation was required because the families did not initially provide evidence that the burial expenses had been paid. As quoted above, OWCP's instructions for completing the claim form did not clearly indicate that this evidence was required.

Some families and funeral homes were also confused because they received the payment for burial expenses directly from the U.S. Treasury without a letter explaining that the check was for burial expenses and how the amount was determined. Three U.S. Treasury checks were sent directly to funeral homes without an explanation as to whose accounts should be credited. As a result, the funeral homes continued to bill the families for total funeral costs. Also, some of the victims' families received \$800 while others received a smaller amount. The families receiving less than \$800 apparently did not know that OWCP had offset against the \$800 any payment of burial benefits paid by SSA or VA.

In commenting on a draft of this report, the Assistant Secretary for Employment Standards, U.S. Department of Labor, told us that the policy requiring receipted bills before paying the burial benefit is being reviewed to see if it should be changed. Also being reviewed for possible clarification are OWCP procedures and instructions.

Several families also expressed frustration because they were not initially reimbursed by the Postal Service for all burial expenses, which ranged from \$2,100 to \$6,300 for the 13 private burials. The other victim was inurned in a national cemetery for about \$800. Several of the families apparently thought that the Postmaster General had promised to pay all burial expenses.

After family representatives complained that the Postal Service had not lived up to its promise to pay all burial expenses, the Postmaster General decided the Postal Service would reimburse the families for the portion of their burial expenses not covered by federal programs. In March 1987, the Postal Service issued reimbursement checks (totaling about \$38,000) to 13 families. Postal Service officials told us that the elapsed time of about 200 days from the tragedy to the date they paid the remainder of the expenses contributed to the families' unhappiness with the Postal Service. It should be noted, however, that the Postal Service was not required by law or regulation to pay the burial expenses.

Refunds of Retirement Contributions

All 14 of the families received a refund of their relatives' contributions to the Civil Service Retirement System, which ranged from about \$47 to about \$24,000. As table 2.2 shows, the refund of the retirement contributions generally took longer than any other type of payment.

OPM's claim form requires that the claim be initially supported by a death certificate. The form states, however, that other supporting documents may subsequently be required. In three of the Edmond cases, OPM received the completed claim forms and death certificates in September 1986. However, OPM notified the Postal Service in December 1986 that additional documents, such as a marriage certificate, a birth certificate, or official proof of dissolution of a previous marriage, were required before these claims could be processed. The request for and submission of required documents extended processing times.

Two claims required about 200 days to process because an OPM claims examiner did not have the necessary documents to process the claims and set the claims aside without requesting the documents. OPM officials did not know that the claims had not been paid until notified by Postal Service officials in February and March 1987. OPM authorized payment of the refunds about 200 days after the claims were initially submitted.

No Follow-Up by Postal Service on Initial Assistance

Immediately following the tragedy, the Postal Service assembled a team of benefit specialists from its headquarters and Memphis Region to assist the families in understanding their entitlements and preparing the required forms. According to information disclosed in the congressional hearing, Postal Service officials told the victims' families that the Postal Service would take care of everything, cut through all the red tape, and

bend the rules if necessary to assist in the payment of benefits. However, after the initial assistance, the Postal Service did not initiate follow-up actions to find out if the families needed help in getting their benefits.

The benefit specialists met with 13 of the families within 8 days of the tragedy and the other family at the end of the second week.¹ The benefit specialists met with the families to provide explanations and estimates of benefits, to assist them in filling out benefit claim forms, and to obtain required documents such as death and marriage certificates that the families had available. After completing the claim forms and obtaining available documents, the Postal Service mailed them to the appropriate agencies. The applications were generally mailed within 2 weeks of the tragedy.

During the initial meetings, the benefit teams provided each family a list of Postal Service personnel located in Washington, D.C.; Memphis, Tennessee; and Oklahoma City, Oklahoma; whom they could later contact if additional assistance was needed. Although the team members recommended that the families first contact Oklahoma City personnel for assistance, the families were told they could also contact other Postal Service employees if necessary.

In addition to providing the above assistance, Postal Service officials contacted the federal agencies responsible for paying benefits and requested their assistance in expediting the claims. OWCP was contacted on the day of the tragedy. Within a week of the tragedy OPM, SSA, and VA were contacted by the Postal Service. Two of the agencies—OWCP and SSA—each designated one claims examiner to process all of the Edmond cases.

After getting the benefit payment process started, the benefit assistance teams disbanded and the Postal Service's Oklahoma City Division Office became responsible for follow-up assistance. Postal Service Headquarters did not issue any specific instructions on what should be done by division employees. Without such instructions, the division, which normally processes benefits for the Edmond Post Office employees, decided it would only assist the families in response to a request. We were told by the Division's Human Resource Manager that the families were not contacted to determine if they needed further assistance or whether

¹The delay in benefit counseling occurred because one family did not live in the Edmond, Oklahoma, area.

they were receiving their benefit payments because it was believed that such contacts would infringe on the families' privacy during a time of grief. Subsequent criticism of the handling of the tragedy can be traced to this decision.

The Manager of the Postal Service's Oklahoma City Division Office told us that, in hindsight, the Postal Service should have designated one person to assist the families, rather than providing them a list of 13 names. He said some families contacted both Oklahoma City and Memphis Postal Service officials with the same question or problem and were provided different answers. He said this resulted in confusion and frustration because the families got different answers on the benefits they were entitled to and when they could expect payments.

To obtain benefits from four federal agencies each family had to furnish several forms and documents to substantiate payments. For example, in order to initiate claims for their benefits, each family had to submit a minimum of five separate claim forms. Further, to support claims, the families had to provide death certificates and, if applicable, marriage certificates, birth certificates, and legal documents showing dissolution of a prior marriage of either the deceased and/or surviving spouse.

After the application process was initiated, the agencies responsible for making payments often requested additional information during the adjudication process to ensure that the appropriate beneficiary had been identified, the payment would be correct, or duplicate benefits would not be paid. For example, seven of the victims' spouses were eligible for a survivor annuity under either the Civil Service Retirement System or the Federal Employees Compensation Act. Both OPM and OWCP had to independently determine the eligibility of the spouses for an annuity, notify them of their eligibility, and determine which of the annuity options the spouses preferred.

During the Committee hearings, a family representative said the families felt that the Postal Service delivered much less than it promised and was unresponsive to the families' requests for further assistance. The representative implied that the families were essentially left on their own to respond to various requests for additional forms and documentation.

Our review of claim files maintained by the Service's Oklahoma City Office showed that postal officials assisted the families in obtaining or understanding benefit payments. However, neither the requests nor the

responses were sufficiently documented to enable us to judge responsiveness.

At the March 1987 congressional hearing, the President of the American Postal Workers Union reported on findings of the Union's investigation of problems experienced by the surviving families and postal employees in the weeks and months following the Edmond tragedy. The President reported that the initial expressions of compassion and offers of assistance by high ranking postal officials were ultimately not translated into action at the local level after the top officials left Edmond. He reported that the lack of information about, and assistance with, benefits was the "chief" problem.

In a statement prepared for the hearing, the Senior Assistant Postmaster General, Human Resources Group, said there was some confusion about the payment of benefits. He cited issues created by potentially overlapping benefits available from SSA, VA, and OWCP with respect to burial expenses, and the fact that the families did not receive identical benefits because of differences in eligibility. Perhaps the situation was best summed up by the Postmaster General in commenting at the hearing on how the families were assisted. He said "what may have happened is that we dropped the ball somewhere between September 1st and the end of the year."

Postal Service Restored Operations While Providing Crisis Assistance

The Postal Service worked with state and local agencies to arrange immediate crisis intervention assistance, and contracted with specialized health care providers to make long-term counseling services available to all employees and the victims' families. Because a majority of the surviving Edmond employees returned to work the day after the tragedy, the Edmond Postmaster was able to continue operations at the Edmond Post Office. However, the aftermath of the tragedy created highly unusual demands on the Postmaster, who was essentially left on his own to establish policies and procedures to deal with the post-trauma effects of the tragedy and to restore normal operations at the Edmond Post Office.

Several employees later said the policies and statements made by the Edmond Postmaster were insensitive considering the tragedy they had experienced. On March 14, 1987, the Postal Service reassigned the Postmaster from his position at the Edmond Post Office to the Oklahoma City Division office. A majority of the Edmond Post Office employees protested his reassignment in a letter to their congressional representative with a copy of the letter to the Postmaster General.

Crisis Counseling Was Immediately Available

Within 6 hours of the shootings, the Attorney General of the State of Oklahoma contacted NOVA, which is located in Washington, D.C. A NOVA crisis response team arrived in Oklahoma City the following day and began planning activities with Edmond city officials and local crisis teams. The Postal Service dispatched its Southern Region Medical Officer to participate in these planning sessions, along with the Edmond Postmaster.

Immediate counseling was provided to employees and families by the crisis team personnel, counselors from a community mental health facility, and volunteers from a local ministerial support center. The crisis team remained in Edmond for 3 days. During this period, the Postal Service arranged with the Edmond ministerial alliance to provide volunteer counseling to employees and families in advance of the Postal Service awarding formal counseling contracts.

In late September 1986, the Postal Service contracted with a local mental health center for psychological counseling services that remained available to the victims' families and employees for the next 6 months. In March 1987, the Postal Service renewed the contract for an additional 2 years. The Postal Service also awarded six additional contracts with individual health care providers to meet particular needs of some

employees and families. The Postal Service did not, however, establish a clear policy and inform employees about their rights to use these services during duty hours.

Restoring Post Office Operations Posed Unique Management Problems

On August 21, 1986, the day following the shootings, most of the Edmond Post Office employees reported for duty to continue the Post Office's normal operation. As a result of the shootings, however, the assailant and 14 other employees (including 2 supervisors) were dead, and 6 other employees who were wounded were not available for duty. To compensate for the loss of about 15 percent of the Edmond workforce, the Postal Service's Oklahoma City Division Office assigned additional workers, supervisors, and specialized support staff to assist the Postmaster in continuing mail service and in training replacement employees during the following weeks. In addition to his responsibility for continuing postal services, the Edmond Postmaster was faced with managing numerous unique demands that resulted from the tragedy. Among the extraordinary activities that the Edmond Postmaster told us he was responsible for managing were the following:

- recognizing and coping with the psychological trauma and stress that he and other employees were experiencing;
- screening the unsolicited volunteer assistance and aid that was being offered from across the country;
- validating the credentials of counselors and medical personnel who volunteered services;
- coordinating the extensive community support and offers of assistance;
- controlling the surge of media personnel, visitors, and curious onlookers;
- coordinating four separate relief funds (from three employee unions and a ministerial association) for the victims and families; and
- negotiating with separate parties who wanted to establish employee memorials.

According to the manager of the Oklahoma City Division, he offered to provide the Edmond Postmaster any additional assistance needed to continue the operations of the Edmond Post Office. The manager assumed, as is customary in the Postal Service, that if the Postmaster needed help, he would ask for it. The Edmond Postmaster told us that the additional personnel assigned to the Edmond Post Office were sufficient to continue operations, and that more personnel would have created even greater difficulty with regard to congested space and supervisory control.

Although the Postmaster was offered operational assistance, an established management practice of leaving the Postmaster with complete responsibility for all local activities was not altered. Consequently, the Postmaster assumed the full burden of responding to many of the extraordinary demands resulting from the tragedy.

In attempting to achieve what he considered was an acceptable level of operating efficiency, the Postmaster took actions that were later characterized in the hearings by several employees as insensitive, such as the following:

- On October 4, 1986, about 6 weeks after the tragedy, the Postmaster told employees that nonemergency counseling services should be obtained on their own time.
- Concerned about the post office's performance, the Postmaster made speeches to employee groups on October 4 and 6, 1986, during which he informed employees they needed to improve their job performance.
- The Postmaster issued memoranda from September through December 1986 directing elimination of clutter on the workroom floor, prohibiting personal telephone calls on office telephones, and informing employees that sympathy cards would be removed from the break area to provide needed space.
- The Postmaster terminated the services of a volunteer counselor who was at the post office during work hours because she was not an accredited counselor and involved herself in a conflict between a postal worker and supervisor at the Edmond Post Office.
- The Postmaster terminated the services of a contract security guard 3 weeks after the shootings. The security guard had been hired to control the number of visitors to the post office and to provide a measure of personal security in the days following the shootings.

The Postmaster said he was not aware of employee complaints regarding his policies and statements until the hearings. He also said that he had believed the Edmond Post Office and employees were well on their way to recovering from the tragic event when he was removed from his position. Seventy-two of the Edmond Post Office's approximately 130 employees signed a letter dated March 13, 1987, protesting the removal of the Edmond Postmaster. The letter said the employees do not believe the problems of the Edmond Post Office should be laid on one individual.

Management of Post-Crisis Activities Should Be Planned

Our review of how the aftermath of the Edmond tragedy was managed by the Postal Service disclosed that the Postal Service acted immediately to (1) provide counseling services to the victims' families and surviving employees, (2) assist the victims' families in obtaining financial benefits, and (3) continue mail service to the community. The initial actions involved various Postal Service employees from the headquarters office in Washington, D.C.; the regional office in Memphis, Tennessee; the division office in Oklahoma City; and the post office in Edmond. Organizational commitment was symbolized by the Postmaster General's visit to Edmond 4 days after the tragedy.

Management of the aftermath did not, however, continue to involve the Postal Service headquarters and regional office. The management of the aftermath was left with employees of the Oklahoma City Division and the Edmond Post Office. The Postal Service headquarters provided no guidance on what should be done to further assist the families in obtaining their financial benefits or to help the surviving employees cope with the post-trauma effects of the tragedy. The Postmaster was left to assume his normal role without any specialized assistance or guidance on dealing with the impact of a tragic event on employees while simultaneously restoring normal postal operations. In an April 1987 letter to the Chairmen of the Postal Subcommittees, the Edmond Postmaster said he benefited from briefings by two psychiatrists associated with California's police departments but "beyond that we were left to chart our own course for recovery."

To evaluate how the aftermath of the Edmond tragedy was managed by the Postal Service, we contacted federal agencies and researched literature for

- policies and procedures followed by public organizations in assisting families of employees who die on duty and
- guidance on how tragedies with both operational and human impact should be handled.

The literature (see bibliography on p. 36) indicates that both public and private organizations have recognized the need for advanced planning to deal with a traumatic event caused by an accident or a natural disaster.

Benefit Counseling

The Departments of the Army and the Navy have developed principles to guide personnel assigned to assist the families of deceased employees.

Some of the specific principles included in one or both of these programs are

- designating one counselor as a single contact for the next of kin or beneficiary;
- waiting until after the funeral to discuss benefits unless requested by next of kin;
- promising only what can be delivered;
- providing clear information on entitled benefits and helping beneficiaries complete application forms and obtain supporting documentation; and
- following up at regular intervals to assist the beneficiary in providing any additional required documentation, to ensure that entitlement processes are understood, to ensure that payments are received, and to help resolve any obstacles and delays.

Even without established guidelines, the Postal Service applied some of the above principles. The Postal Service waited until after the funeral to discuss benefits except for one case where it was requested by the family. In addition, the benefit teams provided the families information on benefits and helped the families complete and submit application forms and supporting documentation.

The Postal Service did not, however, assign one point of contact for each family as recommended by the Departments of the Army and the Navy. Instead, the families were given a list of 13 names they could contact if they had any questions. The families also said at the congressional hearing that the Postal Service did not keep its promise to take care of everything, cut through all the red tape, and bend the rules if necessary to ensure the payment of benefits. Finally, the Postal Service did not have an active follow-up program to expedite payments and mitigate the frustrations the families experienced.

Crisis Management

While the Edmond tragedy was an event unprecedented in the Postal Service, organizations in both the public and private sectors have experienced traumatic circumstances or have anticipated the possibility of such events. Many of these organizations have adopted crisis management procedures and organizational controls to deal with the effects of traumatic events and disasters on their operations, employees, and customers. They recognize that the organization can be called upon to respond to human needs arising from a variety of causes. Some such

organizations are airline companies, municipalities, manufacturers, petrochemical industries, and federal civilian agencies. According to a 1987 study conducted under the auspices of the National Association of Manufacturers, "the business community has become ever more aware of its persistent vulnerability to an expanding and wide range of potential crises, disasters, and catastrophes."¹

The literature shows that corporate executives and researchers have found that a poorly managed crisis has the following characteristics:

- The crisis manager when chosen because of rank or title may not necessarily be the person best-suited for handling crisis events.
- Early indications of trouble, if detected at all, are ignored or warnings are played down.
- Typically, the problems extend and eventually build to a climax.
- As pressure mounts, managers are so overwhelmed they are eventually not able to cope effectively with the crisis.

Some of these characteristics were evident in the aftermath of the Edmond tragedy. First, the Edmond Postmaster became the crisis manager because of his position, although he had no experience or training in crisis management. Second, if early indications of trouble were detected in the weeks following the tragedy, they were apparently ignored or played down. Third, the families' frustrations and employees' resentment continued to build and culminated in public exposure in the media and at a congressional hearing.

To avert the undesirable consequences of unplanned actions, some private companies and government agencies have developed crisis management plans. A survey of the nation's largest industrial companies, done in late 1986 by the University of Southern California's Center for Crisis Management for the National Association of Manufacturers (see fn. 1), found that 38 percent of 110 respondents had a formal crisis management unit.

Our review of the literature, listed in the bibliography, showed that there are several models for dealing with a crisis situation. The models vary based on the nature of disasters to which an organization could be

¹Iau I. Mitroff, Terry C. Pauchant, and Paul Shrivastaya, *Forming a Crisis Portfolio: Putting One's Crisis Preparation on a Firmer Footing* (Center for Crisis Management, Graduate School of Business, University of Southern California, 1987).

exposed, but they all have a common philosophy that action in emergencies is seldom effective unless planned in advance. Some of the relevant principles described in the literature follow:

- The plan must be in writing. Responsible officials may be unavailable, and if they are available they will often be too busy to devise plans that should be readily available to all concerned.
- The plan should identify, in advance, team members from the organization who would be responsible for managing or providing advice for each particular activity of the aftermath. The plan should also include a clear description of the lines of authority and identify managers and specialists who work well under stress and are creative, flexible, and not locked into normal operating procedures. The plan should provide for training the team members to deal with the sensitive nature of traumatic events.
- The plan should provide guidance on how to address the emotional effects that individuals typically experience after a tragedy (shock, disorientation, fatigue, disbelief, anger, grief, confusion, or guilt). The guidance should deal with both the immediate time frame after the disaster and the longer term activities which could extend for months or years. The plan should also address how to obtain both short-term and long-term professional counseling for individuals who need such services.
- The plan should include provisions for handling communications and public relations. For example, it should identify how next of kin will be notified, how employees will be kept informed, and how employees will be involved in the post-tragedy activities. Further, the plan should provide for a public relations specialist to keep the media informed.
- The plan should also include provisions for follow-up to ensure that actions of the team are working as planned.

Postal Service Has Recognized Need for a Plan

The Postal Service has contingency plans to address war, natural disasters, bomb threats, and work stoppages. These plans focus on assuring that postal operations continue when disruptive events occur. However, they do not address the effects following disasters such as human trauma. Following the congressional hearings, the Postmaster General directed that preparations be made for a better response to traumatic events should they occur in the future. This directed planning effort, undertaken by the Assistant Postmaster General for Employee Relations, was ongoing in February 1988.

Recommendation to the Postmaster General

We recommend that the Postmaster General include, within the contingency plan being prepared by the Assistant Postmaster General, principles of crisis management developed by organizations in both the public and private sectors for dealing with the effects of traumatic events and disasters on their operations, employees, and customers.

Agency Comments

In commenting on a draft of this report, the Postal Service said that its contingency plan will include the principles of crisis management as outlined in this chapter. Comments from the Postal Service are included as appendix III.

The Assistant Secretary for Employment Standards, U.S. Department of Labor, in commenting on our recommendation to the Postmaster General, said OWCP could also benefit from a written plan and steps will be taken to develop one. He pointed out that the plan would include active assistance to potential claimants to ensure that they claim and receive benefits to which they are entitled. Comments from the Assistant Secretary are included as appendix IV.

The Director, OPM, chose not to comment on our draft report.

Congressional Request Letter

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House of Representatives

Committee on Post Office
and Civil Service
Washington, DC 20515

TELEPHONE (202) 225-4054

March 19, 1987

Honorable Charles A. Bowsher
Comptroller General of the United States
General Accounting Office
Washington, D. C. 20548

Dear Mr. Bowsher:

On March 5, 1987, Chairman Frank McCloskey of the House Subcommittee on Postal Personnel and Modernization requested a General Accounting Office investigation of personnel management practices of the United States Postal Service.

As a result of an oversight hearing yesterday by the Postal Personnel Subcommittee and the Postal Operations and Services Subcommittee on the August 20, 1986, tragedy at the Edmond, Oklahoma Post Office, we would appreciate your expanding the investigation to include a review of the post-tragedy response of the Postal Service in this instance. Your findings and recommendations would not only benefit Edmond but would be helpful for the future guidance of all involved parties.

Thank you for your cooperation in this matter. Should you have any questions concerning this request, please contact Bill Finch of the Subcommittee on Postal Personnel and Modernization staff at 226-7520.

Sincerely,



Frank McCloskey
Chairman
Subcommittee on Postal
Personnel and Modernization



Mickey Leland
Chairman
Subcommittee on Postal
Operations and Services



Frank Horton
Ranking Minority Member
Subcommittee on Postal
Operations and Services

Postal Service's Efforts to Correct Building Exit Deficiencies¹

The Postal Inspection Service's investigation of the Edmond, Oklahoma, tragedy showed that several safety deficiencies associated with building exits existed at the time of the tragedy. Postal Inspection Service investigators concluded, however, that these deficiencies did not contribute to any of the deaths or injuries.

Nevertheless, the Postal Service directed its 74 divisional offices to perform special safety inspections at locations with 50 or more employees using, among other things, the Life Safety Code 1985 (sec. 5-2) safety standards as criteria. They were asked to determine if similar or other exit safety deficiencies existed and to develop a plan for correcting the deficiencies. These inspections are in addition to the safety inspections all postal facilities with 50 or more employees are required to conduct annually. The Postal Service provided us information showing that, as of August 19, 1987, a majority of the divisions have completed the special inspections and are taking actions to correct the deficiencies with exits. For offices with less than 50 employees, the divisions were told to emphasize compliance with exit safety standards during annual inspections.

Exit Requirements Checklist Used for Special Inspections

In April 1987, the Postal Service informed Field Division General Managers/Postmasters of the initiation of a special inspection program to ensure full compliance with existing Life Safety Code² requirements by all occupied postal-owned and postal-leased facilities. The following checklist was furnished for the special inspections.

Every door that serves as an exit must be such that the way of exit travel is obvious and direct.

Any door that is used as an exit or serves an area with 50 or more persons, must be of the side-hinged, swinging type and must swing outward in the direction of travel.

¹ It should be noted that the issues raised in this appendix are among several issues that form the basis for a lawsuit filed in April 1988 by representatives of the victims of the shootings against, among others, the Postal Service.

² The Life Safety Code was developed by the National Fire Protection Association (NFPA). The Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) has promulgated its regulations concerning means of egress pursuant to NFPA 101-1970, Life Safety Code. (See 29 C.F.R. 1910, Subpart E.)

The forces required to release the latch on any door must not exceed 15 pounds, to set the door in motion must not exceed 30 pounds, or to open the door to the minimum required width not to exceed 15 pounds.

All exit doors must be readily opened from the inside whenever the area is in use and is accessible to the general public or to more than 10 persons. There must be a sign on the inside of all key locked exit doors which reads "This door to remain unlocked when the building is occupied."

The latch or fastening device on all exit doors shall be provided with a knob, handle, panic bar or other simple device which is obvious. A two-step release, such as a knob and an independent slide bolt, is not acceptable.

Special locking and alarm devices may be installed on certain exit doors. Section 5-2.1.6 of the Life Safety Code contains specific requirements.

Any exit door designed to be kept normally closed, must be self-closing.

Designated exits shall be marked with an approved sign readily visible from any path to the exit. Signs shall be placed so as to be readily visible from more than 100 feet away.

Every exit sign must be suitably illuminated by a reliable light source whenever the building is occupied.

Where the direction of travel to reach the nearest exit is not immediately apparent, directional signs must be provided.

Any door, passage, or stairway that is neither an exit nor an exit route, but could be mistaken for an exit must be identified by an appropriate sign reading "NO EXIT." Other doors which lead to dead end spaces must be appropriately marked with a sign indicating their purpose, such as, "Janitor Closet," or "Storeroom."

Dock doors (cargo doors) are not to be construed as an approved exit from any postal facility. Exit signs are not to be placed on or near any dock door leading out of the building. Any existing exit sign must be removed and replaced with a sign on the door reading "NOT AN EXIT." Dock doors which are not in service should be chained or locked. Where appropriate, the area should be marked as to its use. For example, "Storage Area - Not an Exit."

Safety Violations Existed

Following the Edmond tragedy, the Postal Inspection Service investigated the events surrounding the shootings. As part of this investigation, the Inspection Service reviewed compliance at the Edmond Post Office with OSHA safety standards regarding exits. The Inspection Service's investigation showed that some exit signs were not visible from all directions. In addition, the Inspection Service investigators identified that three doors were inappropriately identified as emergency exits on the Edmond Post Office's evacuation plan. The Inspection Service found that two doors should not have been identified as emergency exits because they could be locked from the inside and were not equipped with "panic" bars, which allow a door to be easily opened. It found that the third door should not have been designated as an emergency exit because it was chained and locked. The Inspection Service concluded, however, that these safety deficiencies did not contribute to any of the deaths or injuries. According to Postal Service officials, the safety deficiencies identified at the Edmond Post Office have been corrected.

The Postal Service provided us information on the results of its special inspections which show that, as of August 19, 1987, 63 of its 74 divisions have completed the special safety inspections for facilities within their jurisdiction. The 63 divisions reported a total of 16,551 exit deficiencies of which 5,706 have been corrected. The largest number of deficiencies (2,826) related to the standard requiring signs reading "no exit" on doors, such as janitor's closets and store rooms, which could be mistaken as exits. The second largest number of deficiencies (2,117) related to the need to install lighted exit signs.

Some of the exit deficiencies found by the Postal Service in the special inspections are in noncompliance with OSHA standards and should also have been found in previous regular annual inspections. For example, standards such as those that require some doors to be labeled with "no exit" signs and the installation of lighted exit signs, should have been used during the Postal Service's 1986 annual safety inspections. However, Postal Service information on these inspections is retained at the 74 divisions. Due to the limited scope of our review, we did not determine whether the deficiencies had previously been identified nor how long they existed.

The General Manager of the Postal Service's Safety Management Division told us the Postal Service divisions are required to submit monthly reports until they show they have corrected all identified safety deficiencies. He also told us he plans to conduct some follow-up inspections to ensure compliance with the Life Safety Code.

Comments of the Postmaster General on a Draft of This Report



THE POSTMASTER GENERAL
Washington, DC 20260-0010

April 13, 1988

Dear Mr. Fogel:

This refers to your draft report entitled "How the Postal Service Dealt with the Edmond, Oklahoma, Tragedy."


The report finds the initial assistance the Service provided to the victims' families and to the employees at Edmond was noteworthy, but there was inadequate follow-through. It recommends that the principles of crisis management be included in the contingency plan the Service is currently preparing on handling disasters.

We accept the report's findings and recommendation.

The Postal Service's contingency plan will include the principles of crisis management outlined in Chapter 4 of the report. The application of the principles will be tailored to the Postal Service's administrative and operational structure and systems.

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on your report.

Sincerely,



Anthony M. Frank

Mr. Richard L. Fogel
Assistant Comptroller General
United States General Accounting
Office
Washington, D.C. 20548-0001

Comments of the Assistant Secretary for Employment Standards, U.S. Department of Labor

Note: GAO comments
supplementing those in the
report text appear at the
end of this appendix.

U.S. Department of Labor

Assistant Secretary for
Employment Standards
Washington D.C. 20210



18 APR 1988

Mr. Richard L. Fogel
Assistant Comptroller General
Human Resources Division
U.S. General Accounting Office
Washington, D.C. 20548

Dear Mr. Fogel:

Thank you for the opportunity to review and comment on the General Accounting Office draft report entitled "How the Postal Service Dealt with the Edmond, Oklahoma Tragedy."

The major recommendation of the report, addressed to the Postmaster General, is that the Postal Service develop a plan for responding to crisis events which are apt to overwhelm the normal administrative capacity of the agency. The Office of Workers' Compensation Programs (OWCP) is similarly liable for emergency events when a major accident occurs in a Federal facility. While we believe that our managers have responded well in these situations, we think that OWCP could also benefit from a written plan for such situations, and will take steps to develop one. Such a plan would include active assistance to potential claimants to ensure that they claim and receive benefits to which they are entitled.

On page 19, the report states that OWCP has no time standard or goal for paying benefits to the employees' dependents. In fact, OWCP's standard requires the adjudication of 85 percent of traumatic injury claims within 45 days and 95 percent within 120 days. There is no specific standard for paying the burial benefit, because there are very few such claims and great variation in the availability of documentation. We are reviewing our policy on requiring receipted bills before this benefit is paid to see if it should be changed. We will also review our procedures and instructions for possible clarification.

Sincerely,

FRED W. ALVAREZ

See comment 1.

The following are GAO's comments on the Assistant Secretary for
Employment Standards, U.S. Department of Labor's letter dated April
18, 1988.

GAO Comments

1. The statement that OWCP has no time standard or goal for paying benefits to the employees' dependents was deleted in the final report. The statement referred to paying benefits, not adjudication of claims, but the observation was not necessary because we did not judge responsiveness in making payments. We commented on payments that took the longest time to process without regard to any time standards.

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