

Office of Inspector General | United States Postal Service

RISC Report

Partnering for Health: Potential Postal Service Roles in Health and Wellness

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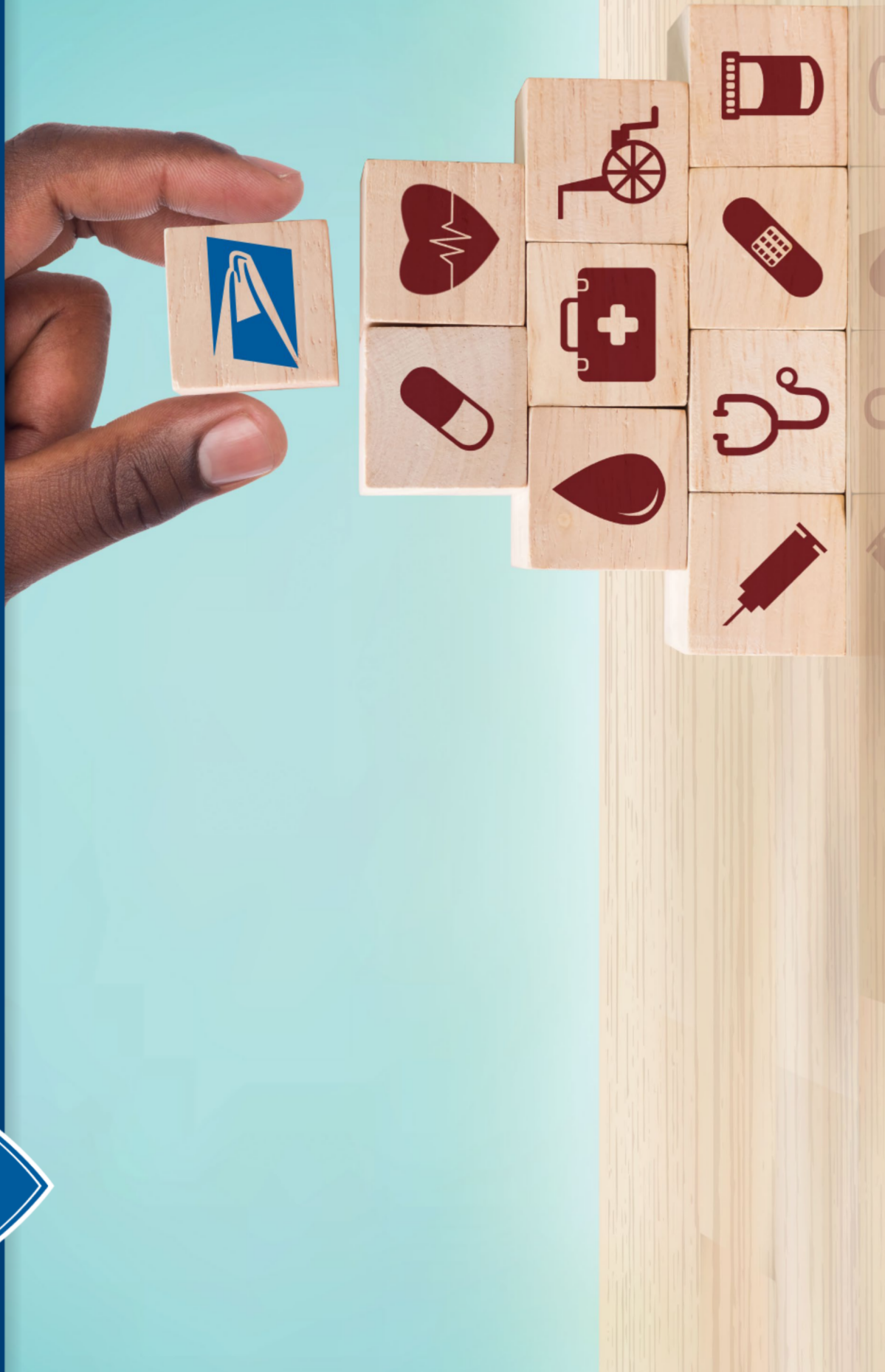


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Executive Summary

The U.S. Postal Service forms a vital part of the nation's logistics and communications infrastructure, bringing economic and social benefits to the American public. This includes supporting the nation's health and wellness sector. Americans already rely on the Postal Service for the timely, reliable, and low-cost delivery of their prescription medications and essential supplies. However, the novel coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic has brought the need to address critical healthcare gaps to the forefront of national conversations. Given its extensive delivery network, large workforce, trusted brand, and nationwide physical infrastructure, the Postal Service might consider additional ways of supporting U.S. health and wellness organizations.

The Postal Service currently has health and wellness initiatives that go beyond the delivery of prescriptions and other medical items. These initiatives include programs sponsored by the letter carrier unions, such as the annual Letter Carriers' Stamp Out Hunger® Food Drive, semipostal stamps, and Carrier Alert — an opt-in service in which letter carriers watch for signs that postal customers could be in trouble. Another program, conducted in conjunction with other federal agencies and local governments, is the Drug Mail-back Program. This program allows individuals to safely mail unneeded prescription drugs to authorized collectors for proper disposal.

The U.S. Postal Service Office of Inspector General (OIG) sought to identify additional opportunities that could enable the Postal Service to play an even more valuable role in the provision of health and wellness services. Significant challenges and gaps exist in providing these services to Americans, including addressing the COVID-19 pandemic, educating people about available health care services, and improving access to high-quality health care. Carefully planned postal partnerships with private and public sector health and wellness organizations could help address some of these gaps without impacting USPS's core mission of moving and delivering letters and parcels throughout the country.

The OIG conducted interviews with health and wellness subject matter experts, who identified several potential roles the Postal Service could play. Specifically,

Highlights

Significant gaps exist in the provision of health and wellness services to Americans, including addressing the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, a lack of information about available health and wellness services and programs, and limited access to these services.

The Postal Service already supports access for Americans to health and wellness services, including the delivery of prescription medications, as well as the Carrier Alert program, an opt-in service where letter carriers watch for signs that postal customers could be in trouble.

Additional partnerships with health and wellness organizations or government agencies could leverage the Postal Service's existing resources to connect communities with the services they need.

opportunities exist for the Postal Service to play larger a role in helping the nation recover from the COVID-19 pandemic and potentially respond to future public health emergencies that may emerge. Addressing the gap in obtaining reliable health care information, the local availability of health resources could be advertised at post offices to help promote public awareness. Further, local postal management could partner with community health organizations to help identify residents' health and wellness needs. USPS could also allow healthcare providers to use its address matching tool to improve patients' health record accuracy, reducing breakdowns in patient identification. Finally, to improve access to health care in certain underserved areas, some postal facilities could host telehealth consultations for citizens who are unable to meet with a medical professional face-to-face.

There are several important considerations for the implementation of any health and wellness-related partnership between the Postal Service and health providers. While new partnerships or initiatives might generate enough revenue to cover costs, there are currently legal restrictions associated with profiting from nonpostal services. Legally, it would also be easier for the Postal Service to partner with other federal government agencies than it would be to pursue a partnership with a private entity. Additionally, considerations such as the condition of specific postal facilities and the availability of space will need to be addressed before any initiatives can commence.

Access to quality health and wellness services is critically important for all Americans. This paper provides details on potential opportunities for the Postal Service to help support the provision of health and wellness services, contribute to the country's recovery from COVID-19, and meet post-pandemic health and wellness needs. While it is imperative that any such initiatives do not distract from or interfere with the Postal Service's core mission, targeted partnerships could effectively leverage the unique size and reach of the Postal Service's nationwide network. Doing so will require creative thinking and a forward-looking vision. The benefits from these services to the American public could be long-lasting and substantial.

Observations

Introduction

The U.S. Postal Service forms a vital part of the nation's logistics and communications infrastructure, with both high economic and social importance. As such, it also plays an important role in the nation's health and wellness. Millions of Americans rely on the Postal Service for timely, reliable, and low-cost delivery of their prescription medications and essential supplies. Health and wellness organizations also use the mail for diagnostic testing and other critical services.

In 2015, the U.S. Postal Service Office of Inspector General (OIG) published a paper titled *The Postal Service's Role in Delivering Wellness Services and Supplies*.¹ This paper identified potential opportunities for the Postal Service to contribute to the delivery of health and wellness services to the American public. Examples cited in the paper include the delivery of medicines by mail, offering letter carrier check-in services and health alerts, and providing rental space and health kiosks at post offices for services such as telemedicine.

Five years later, the need for such services has only increased. For example, the U.S. population is aging, there is a digital and healthcare access divide,² and the COVID-19 pandemic has put new demands on the healthcare system.³ Although pandemic-related restrictions may be temporary, COVID-19 highlighted broader societal healthcare needs and has likely permanently altered provider approaches to health and wellness.⁴ Lessons learned from the current pandemic will prove critically important should the nation ever face a similar crisis in the future. Therefore, the OIG took a fresh look at opportunities where the Postal Service could support health and wellness services across the country through partnerships with public- and private-sector organizations.

Objective, Scope, and Methodology

The OIG's objective was to identify opportunities for the Postal Service to participate in the provision of health and wellness services in the United States, including those that have emerged because of the COVID-19 pandemic. The research focused on answering three questions:

1. What roles has the Postal Service played in meeting health and wellness needs?
2. What are primary gaps in services provided by health and wellness organizations, including (but not limited to) the provision of services to older Americans or disadvantaged communities?
3. What are future opportunities for the Postal Service to provide additional health and wellness services, including partnerships with other organizations to help meet these needs?

To answer these questions, the OIG reviewed publicly available research and Postal Service materials, interviewed postal management, and spoke with more than 30 health and wellness subject matter experts and federal agency representatives. See [Appendix A](#) for additional details on our methodology.

Current Ways the Postal Service Supports Health and Wellness Services

The Postal Service and its employees currently support the provision of health and wellness services to the American public in several ways. The following services and programs are currently in place to help address Americans' health and wellness needs.

1 USPS Office of Inspector General, *Issue Brief: The Postal Service's Role in Delivering Wellness Services and Supplies*, Report No. RARC-IB-15-004, July 22, 2015, https://www.uspsoig.gov/sites/default/files/document-library-files/2015/rarc-ib-15-004_the_postal_services_role_in_delivering_wellness_services_and_supplies_0.pdf.

2 We define this divide as the lack of broadband access that would enable telehealth encounters, compounded with a lack of adequate access to readily available in-person care.

3 COVID-19 stands for "Coronavirus Disease 2019" and is caused by a novel coronavirus named Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome Coronavirus 2 (SARSCoV-2).

4 For example, on July 2, 2020, a bipartisan group of 38 senators sent a letter to Health and Human Services and the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services requesting a written plan, including a timeline, outlining permanent changes to Medicare telehealth rules. The letter called rule changes that allowed for the increased use of telehealth options as a "lifeline" for patients and care providers. See: Letter to Secretary Azar and Administrator Vema, July 2, 2020, https://www.capito.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/LTO_%202020.7.2_%20Smith%20Cassidy%20Telehealth%20Letter.pdf.

Delivering Prescription Medicines and Supplies

The Postal Service can be a critical lifeline to many Americans. It delivers mail-order prescriptions and medical supplies, including to individuals who may face challenges in obtaining them from a store.

In normal times, millions of people, especially those with chronic health conditions, depend on the Postal Service for the timely, reliable, and low-cost delivery of their daily medications. This can be particularly important in rural areas where the closest pharmacy may be miles away. During the COVID-19 pandemic, reliance on mail-order prescriptions has increased — 20 percent by some industry estimates — as more people stay home and turn to the mail for essential items.⁵ A representative from a major pharmacy chain told the OIG that its medication shipments increased 33 percent during the pandemic, due to shifting patient and consumer behaviors.

Figure 1: USPS Prescription Delivery



Source: USPS.

- 5 "Rapidly Increasing Postal Service Delivery Delays for Mail-Order Prescription Drugs Pose Health Risks for Millions of Americans," Staff Report Prepared for U.S. Senator Elizabeth Warren and U.S. Senator Bob Casey, September 2020, <https://www.casey.senate.gov/download/casey-warren-mail-order-drug-staff-report-final>.
- 6 For more information on one example of an alliance in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, see: "New Drug Mail Back Program," Milwaukee Metropolitan Sewerage District (MMSD), December 1, 2016, <https://www.mmsd.com/about-us/news/new-drug-mail-back-program>.
- 7 According to the 2018 National Survey on Drug Use and Health, nearly 10 million Americans misused controlled prescription pain relievers, most of which were taken from home medicine cabinets. For more information, see: Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, *Key Substance Use and Mental Health Indicators in the United States: Results from the 2018 National Survey on Drug Use and Health*, Health and Human Services Publication No. PEP19-5068, NSDUH Series H-54, August 2019, <https://www.samhsa.gov/data/sites/default/files/cbhsq-reports/NSDUHNationalFindingsReport2018/NSDUHNationalFindingsReport2018.pdf>, pp. 23 and the DEA's National Take Back Day web site: <https://takebackday.dea.gov/>.
- 8 The Drug Mail-back Program is vital for giving individuals physically unable to bring their medications to collection sites an option to use the U.S. mail. However, there are more than 11,000 Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA)-authorized collection sites around the country that provide a safe way to discard old prescription medications any day of the year. To search for a DEA-authorized collection site, see: DEA, Division Control Division, Controlled Substance Public Disposal Locations – Search Utility, https://apps2.deadiversion.usdoj.gov/pubdispsrch/spring/main;jsessionid=8Xj45yCbVYJ6SSzYzbTVNYCNIDE_85YjaTBISiM.web?execution=e1s1.

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Drug Mail-back Program

To assist Americans in the proper disposal of unwanted, unused, or expired prescription medications, the Drug Mail-back Program — a partnership between federal agencies and the private sector — was established.⁶ The program's goal is to decrease the amount of prescription medications, including controlled substances such as opioids, that are misused, abused, or accidentally ingested.⁷

Figure 2: DEA-Approved Envelope



Source: USPS.

The Postal Service plays an integral role in the Drug Mail-back Program by facilitating the safe, secure, and environmentally responsible return of prescription medications through the mail. This is especially important to people who do not have access to physical drop-off collection sites — either due to geographic location or as a result of the pandemic.⁸ Users of the program can ask their

doctor, pharmacy, or local police department for a prepaid, padded envelope in order to mail their unwanted medications via the Postal Service to an authorized location, where they are destroyed. Pre-paid postage ensures that a mail-back package is not returned to sender, thereby helping to minimize the risk of medications ending up in the wrong hands.⁹

Carrier Alert

As Postal Service letter carriers move along their delivery routes, they are in a unique position to notice when a customer's mail is accumulating longer than usual. They may also notice other changes in behavior that indicate a person needs help.¹⁰ Carriers' intimate knowledge of the communities they serve is the foundation for the Carrier Alert program, which assists aging, homebound, and disabled postal customers. This free, opt-in service — launched in 1982 — is a joint effort of the Postal Service and the National Association of Letter Carriers (NALC). Postal customers register through a local sponsoring agency, such as the United Way, Red Cross, or Area Agency on Aging, and an identifying decal or code is affixed to the inside of registrants' mailboxes. Letter carriers then know to report a buildup of uncollected mail to the partner agency or postal management.

According to a NALC representative, Carrier Alert is well established in some regions of the country, but little known in others. This variance is due to the voluntary nature of the program and the need to partner with a local agency. However, even in areas where a formal Carrier Alert program is not in place, letter

"[F]or some citizens in need of assistance, their heroes come in the form of concerned letter carriers. [They] are members of nearly every community in this nation and know when something is wrong."

-- National Association of Letter Carriers

carriers watch out for their customers. Each year, NALC and the Postmaster General recognize letter carriers who assist when people need them the most. These postal heroes not only deliver mail and packages six or seven days a week but are sometimes the first to notice when something goes wrong. In the normal course of their workdays, carriers have selflessly rescued people from burning homes, helped accident victims, and assisted people suffering medical emergencies. Their constant presence has helped save lives in the communities they serve.

Letter Carriers' Stamp Out Hunger® Food Drive

In 2019, about 11 percent of households in the United States were food insecure, including veterans, children, and the elderly.¹¹ The pandemic has only worsened the problem.¹² To help fight hunger in the communities they serve, letter carriers represented by NALC and other postal unions, with support from the Postal Service and national partners, conduct the Letter Carriers' Stamp Out Hunger® Food Drive — the nation's largest one-day food drive.¹³ Each year on the second Saturday in May, millions of Americans put bags of non-perishable food items on their porch or near their mailbox for postal workers to collect as they deliver mail along their routes. These donations then go directly to local non-profit charity food agencies for distribution to

Figure 3: Stamp Out Hunger® Food Drive logo



Source: NALC.

⁹ The cost of postage is the responsibility of DEA-authorized collectors; however, some mail-back programs collaborate with other collectors to share costs, or they obtain funding and other support from donors like environmental conservation groups, local governments, state grants, and public and private donations.

¹⁰ "Accumulating mail is a common clue [that a postal customer may be in distress], but lights burning in midday, pet dogs crying, drawn draperies, or no tracks in the snow—all can signal trouble within." See: "Community Service – Carrier Alert," NALC, <https://www.nalc.org/community-service/carrier-alert>.

¹¹ Alisha Coleman-Jensen et al., *Household Food Security in the United States in 2019*, U.S. Department of Agriculture, September 2020, <https://www.ers.usda.gov/webdocs/publications/99282/err-275.pdf?v=4895.3>.

¹² Feeding America projected that more than 15 percent of the population would experience food insecurity in 2020. See "The Impact of the Coronavirus on Food Insecurity in 2020," Feeding America, October 2020, https://www.feedingamerica.org/sites/default/files/2020-10/Brief_Local%20Impact_10.2020_0.pdf.

¹³ In addition to the Postal Service and NALC, national partners of the 2020 Stamp Out Hunger® Food Drive include United Way Worldwide, United Food and Commercial Workers International Union, Kellogg Co., National Rural Letter Carriers' Association, CVS Health, Valpak, American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations, and Valassis. For more information, see: "Letter Carriers' Stamp Out Hunger® Food Drive," NALC, <https://www.nalc.org/community-service/food-drive>.

individuals and families in need. In 2020, the 28th annual Stamp Out Hunger® Food Drive was postponed to ensure the safety of Postal Service employees during the COVID-19 pandemic; in its place, NALC applied a new approach whereby citizens could donate money directly to their local food bank.¹⁴ Over the past 27 years, this food drive has resulted in the collection of 1.75 billion pounds of food, which has contributed to the health and wellbeing of many Americans.

Semipostal Stamps

Semipostal stamps issued and sold by the Postal Service help support important medical research. Semipostals serve as postage, but their cost includes a surcharge over regular postal fees in order to raise money for causes deemed to be in the national public interest. Three of the Postal Service's four current semipostal stamps focus on health and wellness, including:



Breast Cancer Research: This was the very first semipostal, mandated by Congress in 1998 to raise public awareness and help fund the fight to find a cure for breast cancer.¹⁵ As of December 2020, this stamp has raised more than \$92.4 million. Seventy percent of the net amount raised is transferred to the National Institutes of Health (NIH), and 30 percent goes to the Medical Research Program at the Department of Defense.



Alzheimer's: This semipostal was issued in 2017 at the discretion of the Postal Service. Since December 2020, it has raised more than \$1.09 million; 100 percent of the net amount raised goes to NIH to fund Alzheimer's research.

Healing Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder: This semipostal was issued in 2019 to raise funds to benefit the tens of millions of



Americans who experience post-traumatic stress disorder. As of December 2020, \$1.04 million has been raised, and 100 percent of the net amount goes to the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA).

"People are going to [say], ... 'Maybe PTSD isn't something that I need to hide. Wow, the Postal Service even has a stamp for it.'"

- Wounded Warriors Project

The Postal Service is Well Positioned to Contribute to Health and Wellness Services

While the Postal Service already plays an important role in bringing health and wellness services to its customers, the OIG sought to identify additional initiatives that could allow USPS to increase its impact. Through our interviews with health and wellness experts, we learned that millions of Americans face challenges in accessing health and wellness services.

These challenges include a lack of awareness of available services among potential beneficiaries and lack of access to these services due to the digital and healthcare access divide. The experts interviewed said that providers may also find it difficult to offer sufficient digital health and wellness solutions to those in need. The COVID-19 pandemic only accentuated existing problems. These challenges have detrimental impacts, including disparities in health outcomes among different geographic and socioeconomic groups.¹⁶

The Postal Service is well positioned to potentially help health and wellness providers in several ways:

- **Extensive Delivery Network:** The size of the Postal Service's nationwide logistics and delivery network uniquely positions it to deliver pharmaceuticals, medical supplies, and other mail and parcels. This network is utilized by

¹⁴ For more information, see: "2021 Stamp Out Hunger Donor Drive," NALC, <https://www.nalc.org/community-service/food-drive/2020-donor-drive>.

¹⁵ See P.L. 105-41; 39 U.S.C. 404.

¹⁶ Samantha Artiga et al., "Disparities in Health and Health Care: Five Key Questions and Answers," Kaiser Family Foundation, March 2020, <http://files.kff.org/attachment/issue-brief-disparities-in-health-and-health-care-five-key-questions-and-answers.pdf>.

medical suppliers, health and wellness organizations, and residents in every community in the United States.

- **Large Workforce and Trusted Brand:** The Postal Service employs more than 600,000 professionals with a presence in nearly every community in the country, including more than 339,000 letter carriers.¹⁷ Many postal employees have intimate knowledge of their communities, often serving the same customers for years and developing strong relationships with them. Carriers and clerks have face-to-face relationships with the people they serve, and the Postal Service brand is one of the most trusted in the country.¹⁸

- **Nationwide Physical Infrastructure:** The Postal Service manages more than 31,000 facilities throughout the United States, including more than 26,000 retail post offices located in nearly every community in the nation, as well as larger processing centers.¹⁹ Many post offices already offer citizens some non-postal services. These services include working with the U.S. Department of State to process passport applications and teaming with the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) to offer fingerprinting services.²⁰ The Postal Service also has an extensive digital infrastructure supported by broadband connections serving individual post offices.²¹

Health and wellness organizations could explore potential partnerships with the Postal Service that leverage its logistics network or community reach. Potential partnerships could be with the private sector; health and wellness non-profits; or federal, state, and local government agencies. The Postal Service also could help these entities reach people in post offices or at their homes with information on available benefits and services.²²

Maximizing the potential benefits of these partnerships will require creativity and a forward-looking vision. These potential collaborations — some of which are detailed below — would be less about revenue and more about providing an additional public service. Participating in this important endeavor could allow health and wellness organizations to better fulfill their missions while underscoring the Postal Service's already important role in American life.

Helping the Nation Recover from the COVID-19 Pandemic and Future Public Health Emergencies

The COVID-19 pandemic presents the nation with a public health emergency the likes of which have not been seen for over a century. Health and wellness organizations are dealing with unforeseen challenges in their efforts to keep the public healthy and safe. Despite their valiant efforts, however, they are at times overwhelmed by the sheer size of the challenges they face. The pandemic has made abundantly clear the importance of utilizing every available resource to help keep the public safe. One such resource is the Postal Service.

The Postal Service has taken steps to support the nation during the COVID-19 pandemic. For example, the Postal Service has played a role in helping distribute testing supplies for combating COVID-19. Currently, Americans have two choices of COVID-19 tests: either on-site tests (such as those offered from doctors, at pharmacies, and drive-through sites), or at-home, self-administered tests. According to postal representatives, early in the pandemic, the Postal Service partnered with several manufacturers and laboratories to deliver and retrieve test kits to healthcare providers and individuals.

The Postal Service worked with the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), and other

¹⁷ The number of letter carriers includes city delivery carriers, full-time rural delivery carriers, rural part-time carriers, and city-carrier assistants. "United States Postal Service Fiscal Year 2020 Annual Report to Congress," USPS, <https://about.usps.com/what/financials/annual-reports/fy2020.pdf>, p. 28.

¹⁸ "Most Trusted Brands 2020," Morning Consult, 2020, <https://morningconsult.com/most-trusted-brands/>.

¹⁹ These figures do not include post offices and delivery points that are not managed by the Postal Service. "United States Postal Service Fiscal Year 2020 Annual Report to Congress", USPS, <https://about.usps.com/what/financials/annual-reports/fy2020.pdf>, p. 26.

²⁰ Thousands of post offices offer passport services, and 101 post offices offer fingerprinting services. See: "Passports," U.S. Postal Service, <https://www.usps.com/international/passports.htm>, "In Safe Hands," USPS News Link, April 23, 2020, <https://link.usps.com/2020/04/23/>, and "Identity History Summary Checks," Federal Bureau of Investigation, <https://www.fbi.gov/services/cjis/identity-history-summary-checks>.

²¹ A 2012 OIG report found that 97 percent of post offices were in areas served by broadband connections. See: USPS Office of Inspector General, *21st Century Post Office: Aligning with the National Broadband Infrastructure Initiative*, DA-MA-12-002, January 23, 2012, <https://www.uspsig.gov/sites/default/files/document-library-files/2015/DA-MA-12-002.pdf>.

²² The Postal Service is authorized to provide these services to government organizations under 39 U.S.C. § 411: "felixcutive agencies ... are authorized to furnish property, both real and personal, and personal and nonpersonal services to the Postal Service, and the Postal Service is authorized to furnish property and services to them."

agencies to distribute, store, label, and deliver critically important government-supplied personal protective equipment (PPE), such as N95 and surgical masks. These vital supplies went to federal, state, local, and tribal agencies, as well as other organizations involved in the response to COVID-19.²³ As of mid-February 2021 the USPS Material Distribution Center had shipped 96 million masks for HHS.²⁴

According to Postal Service management, USPS also donated 500,000 N95 masks from its own stockpile in late March 2020 as part of an agreement with FEMA, HHS, and the U.S. Department of Homeland Security. These masks were distributed to states in the Northeast, primarily New York, which at that time was the epicenter of the pandemic in the United States.

As important as these actions have been, there are additional public health gaps — especially in rural America — the Postal Service could help address in response to the current pandemic and future public health emergencies.²⁵ Specifically, the Postal Service could play a role in COVID-19 vaccine distribution, storage, and staging.

Vaccine Distribution

To distribute the first COVID-19 vaccines, federal and local health officials have worked with FedEx and UPS to transport the vaccine to distribution sites.²⁶ Postal Service representatives told the OIG that USPS was not considered for distribution of the first COVID-19 vaccines because its delivery network lacks the capability to maintain the extremely cold temperatures necessary to keep the vaccines viable.²⁷ Postal Service representatives also cited USPS lacking its own fleet of airplanes, which private shippers have and can utilize for time-sensitive vaccine shipments. Representatives of a major pharmacy added that if the Postal Service were to take on delivery of COVID-19 vaccines or other biologics

dependent on a cold chain, it would have to overcome the challenges of service variability and ensure precise tracking of vaccines.

Figure 4: Vaccine Being Administered



Source: Getty Images.

Nonetheless, the Postal Service could play a role in distributing COVID-19 vaccines, especially as those not requiring ultra-cold storage come to market. The Postal Service could help with logistics — including tracking vaccine distribution, storage, and transportation.²⁸ Specifically, the Postal Service rents space on airplanes from commercial airlines, private shippers, and charter companies to transport time-sensitive mail and parcels across the country daily. The Postal Service's preexisting access to space on airplanes could be leveraged to transport vaccines. An official with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's (CDC) Office of the Associate Director for Policy and Strategy told the OIG that the Postal Service could be a promising partner in helping with future vaccine distribution initiatives, particularly in rural areas of the country

²³ USPS Office of Inspector General, *The U.S. Postal Service and Emergency Response: A History of Delivering for the American Public*, Report No. RISC-WP-20-006, September 10, 2020, <https://www.uspsoig.gov/sites/default/files/document-library-files/2020/RISC-WP-20-006.pdf>.

²⁴ Information provided by Postal Service management on February 18, 2021.

²⁵ Notably, in the event of a Presidential emergency declaration, as part of the Robert T. Stafford Disaster Relief and Emergency Assistance Act, the Postal Service could be legally required to assist in federal emergency response efforts that align with its core function of delivering the mail and physical goods. In such an occurrence, it would be incumbent upon the Postal Service to take all steps within its power to help address the emergency regardless of any short-term financial implications. Following an emergency declaration, FEMA can give support agencies like the Postal Service what are called "mission assignments," in order to ensure specific tasks are done in response to the emergency. Agency expenses that arise from the mission assignments may be reimbursed by FEMA. For more information, see USPS Office of Inspector General, *The U.S. Postal Service and Emergency Response: A History of Delivering for the American Public*.

²⁶ Lena H. Sun and Frances Stead Sellers, "Now comes the hardest part: Getting a coronavirus vaccine from loading dock to upper arm," *The Washington Post*, Tuesday, November 23, 2020, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/health/2020/11/23/covid-getting-vaccine/>.

²⁷ For example, the Pfizer COVID-19 vaccine, first distributed in mid-December 2020, needs to be transported and stored at temperatures below -90° F.

²⁸ Bennett Doughty and Pamela Stewart Fahs, "How are we going to get COVID-19 vaccines to rural Americans?", *Fast Company*, January 5, 2021, <https://www.fastcompany.com/90590872/how-are-we-going-to-get-covid-19-vaccines-to-rural-americans>.

where it has an extensive delivery and retail network. In the long term, continued innovation and improvement of package tracking and transportation technology would better enable the Postal Service to deliver valuable, time-sensitive shipments — such as vaccines — and allow recipients to know exactly where a shipment is at all times.

Vaccine Storage

FedEx and UPS took specific steps to prepare for COVID-19 vaccine shipments. For example, FedEx acquired ultra-cold freezers to improve its cold chain capability and hired more workers. UPS purchased freezers and ramped up its dry ice production capacity.²⁹ Postal Service representatives told the OIG that the specific requirements of the first COVID-19 vaccine made it difficult for the Postal Service to play a role in this vaccine's storage.

Some future COVID-19 vaccines, however, can be stored at standard refrigerator temperatures.³⁰ If these are approved, the Postal Service could potentially partner with local or state health organizations to provide unused space — particularly in larger processing and distribution centers — to host the refrigeration equipment necessary for storing the vaccines until they are needed. Two health experts, one from the National Community Pharmacists Association and another from the Health Resources and Services Administration's Federal Office of Rural Health Policy, said that the Postal Service could potentially store large quantities of vaccine doses at hubs throughout the country for distribution to nearby communities, such as in rural areas. In this scenario, partner organizations could be responsible for providing the necessary equipment and would assume any liability for their use.

Vaccine Staging

Opportunities may exist for the Postal Service to work with state and local health authorities in leveraging its existing infrastructure for vaccine administration sites in areas of need. During the widespread distribution of the COVID-19 vaccine to the public or in future health emergencies, some postal facilities could be used as staging areas for vaccine, PPE, and medical supplies distribution. A CDC official suggested that the Postal Service could use its footprint in rural areas to assist government agencies, clinics, or pharmacies in future vaccination efforts.³¹ Currently, COVID-19 vaccinations are being distributed at drive-through locations across the country.³² Post offices might be able to host vaccination tents or a drive-through clinic in their parking lots. As the Postal Service has physical facilities in nearly every town throughout the country, staging vaccines and supplies at post offices with a sufficiently large footprint would be both convenient and efficient. Local post offices could alert health authorities in their communities to the availability of space.

Health and Wellness Information

Government and non-government health and wellness organizations at the local, state, and national levels provide a variety of services but may have limited resources for communication and outreach. The Postal Service is uniquely suited to potentially address three challenges stemming from a lack of health and wellness information: reaching difficult-to-contact populations, facilitating address matching, and serving as a community touchpoint.

Disseminating Information About Available Health Resources

People who are most in need of assistance are often the hardest to reach and may not know they are eligible for or how to access services. The difficulties in spreading awareness of health and wellness services have increased during the COVID-19 pandemic. As people, especially the elderly and those with limited

²⁹ Wayne Risher, "FedEx ramps up for COVID-19 vaccine distribution," *Daily Memphian*, November 12, 2020, <https://daily.memphian.com/article/17261/fedex-ramping-up-for-covid-19-vaccine-distribution> and "UPS Healthcare Enhances Dry Ice Production Capabilities, Launches Mobile Freezer Storage Units," UPS, November 24, 2020, <https://www.pressroom.ups.com/pressroom/ContentDetailsViewer.page?ConceptType=PressReleases&id=1606216794921-146>.

³⁰ The Oxford-AstraZeneca vaccine, for example, does not need to be stored in sub-freezing conditions. For more information, see: Michael Zennie, "The Oxford-AstraZeneca Vaccine Approval May Be the Most Globally Important Yet," *TIME*, December 30, 2020, <https://time.com/5925495/oxford-astrazeneca-vaccine-approval/>.

³¹ Representatives of AARP (formerly called the American Association of Retired Persons), the CDC's Office of the Associate Director for Policy and Strategy, the National Community Pharmacists Association, and the Health Research and Services Administration Federal Office of Rural Health Policy all told the OIG that Postal Service infrastructure could play a role in vaccine distribution.

³² Caroline Shannon Karasik, "How do drive-through COVID-19 vaccinations work?," *Verywell Health*, January 13, 2021, <https://www.verywellhealth.com/covid-19-drive-through-clinic-5095384>.

Internet access or usage, stay in their homes to avoid contracting the virus, they may have fewer opportunities to learn about available programs. At the same time, the pandemic is increasing social isolation and emotional stress, which has heightened the need for services such as mental health treatment and domestic violence counseling. Compounding this even further is misinformation in the age of social media, when the potential for false information circulating is greater than ever before.³³ This lack of accurate information about available programs leads to some benefit programs being undersubscribed throughout the country. For example, an estimated 16 percent of those eligible for the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (commonly called SNAP and formerly known as the Food Stamp program) did not participate in the program as of 2017, and participation in 19 states was significantly lower than the national average.³⁴

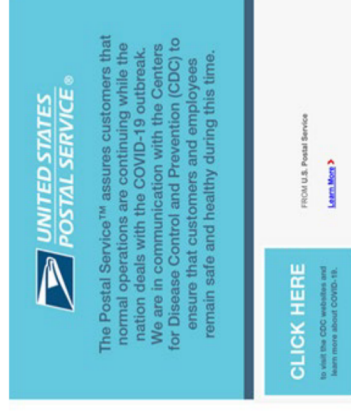
The Postal Service could play a role in helping to minimize the challenges outlined above by facilitating the timely and accurate dissemination of health-related information to the public. Post offices, which are often the only physical link people have to the federal government, could serve as trusted sources of accurate information about available resources by hanging posters on behalf of wellness organizations, having a section with pamphlets, or allowing the use of preexisting bulletin boards. These messages could be tailored to provide information specific to the community in which the post office is located.³⁵ Previous work by the OIG found that these bulletin boards are particularly valuable in rural communities, with 31 percent of rural postal customers (versus 26 percent non-rural) expressing interest in physical bulletin boards at their local post office.³⁶ With better information or more effective messaging about this and other available services, more Americans could receive information about available health and wellness resources.

The promotion of accurate public health information is especially critical during times of crisis. For example, in March 2020, the Postal Service partnered with the CDC to share important guidance on the emerging COVID-19 pandemic on its Informed Delivery platform (See Figure 5).³⁷

Figure 5: Using Informed Delivery to Share COVID-19 Guidance

THE POSTAL SERVICE USED ITS INFORMED DELIVERY PLATFORM TO SHARE TIMELY AND RELEVANT INFORMATION ON COVID-19 SAFETY

In March 2020, the Postal Service partnered with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) to distribute an emergency alert about COVID-19. This message was sent to 23.5 million Informed Delivery subscribers via email and posted on users' Informed Delivery dashboards, where they were given a link to a CDC web site with the latest guidance on the pandemic.



Source: U.S. Postal Service Informed Delivery Digest email sent to subscribers in mid-March 2020.

³³ See, for example: Amir Bagherpour and Ali Nouri, "COVID Misinformation is Killing People," *Scientific American*, October 11, 2020, <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/covid-misinformation-is-killing-people/>.
³⁴ Karen Cunningham, "Estimates of State Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program Participation Rates in 2017," United States Department of Agriculture, August 2020, <https://fns-prod.azureedge.net/sites/default/files/resource-files/Reaching2017-1.pdf>.

³⁵ While there are some legal restrictions about what information the Postal Service could display in postal facilities, the posting of federal government information is generally permissible.
³⁶ USPS Office of Inspector General, *Addressing the Diverse Needs and Wants of Rural America: Opportunities for the U.S. Postal Service*, Report No. RISC-WP-19-009, September 16, 2019, <https://www.uspsog.gov/sites/default/files/document-library-files/2019/RISC-WP-19-009.pdf>.

³⁷ "Getting the word out," USPS News Link, March 19, 2020, <https://link.usps.com/2020/03/19/getting-the-word-out/>. Informed Delivery is a free USPS electronic notification system that allows residential customers to preview their mail and track packages. For more information, see USPS's Informed Delivery website: <https://informedelivery.usps.com/>.

Post offices also could be used to disseminate accurate information from official sources about the safety and efficacy of a vaccine, whether for COVID-19 or future public health threats. A November 2020 survey reported that 39 percent of respondents said they ‘probably’ or ‘definitely’ would not get a COVID-19 vaccine if it were available. Almost half of that 39 percent said they could possibly change their minds once others get vaccinated and more information was available.³⁸ Using post offices as another trusted source of information could help dispel some of the skepticism surrounding the COVID-19 vaccines’ safety and effectiveness, which could encourage a higher percentage of Americans to be immunized against the virus. Similarly, local post offices could provide information about where and when people could access a vaccine in their area.³⁹ The CDC has already generated materials addressing the safety and effectiveness of the COVID-19 vaccines, including potential side effects and the need to maintain relevant safety measures even after being vaccinated.⁴⁰

Coordinating the Address Matching Tool with Providers and Public Health Officials

Another way the Postal Service could support public health is by helping wellness organizations ensure that patient medical records have accurate address information. This could be done by extending use of the Postal Service’s address standardization tool. As healthcare providers or facilities make greater use of electronic health records, improved patient matching is needed to ensure complete and current health information — for instance, when a patient visits two

or more different doctors. Inconsistent and non-standardized addresses in patient health records can lead to duplicate records. This may threaten continuity of care, contribute to patient harm, and prevent public health officials from receiving complete patient health data in a timely manner.

The Postal Service’s address standardization tool, which a study showed would improve patient matching, is currently only offered to retail and shipping companies to format addresses, but not the healthcare industry.⁴¹ Bipartisan legislation to facilitate the sharing of this tool with the healthcare industry was introduced in the U.S. Senate in August 2020; it was assigned to a committee for discussion but not voted into law.⁴² In February 2021, Senators Maggie Hassan and Bill Cassidy reintroduced the bipartisan legislation, titled the Patient Matching Improvement Act of 2021.⁴³ If the bill eventually becomes law, healthcare providers would be given access to the standardization tool as a way to enhance patient matching.

Making the Postal Service’s mailing address standardization tool more widely available could also address a potential challenge with patient matching for COVID-19 contact tracing and vaccine deployment. Laboratories might be able to use this tool to help ensure that public health officials have the information needed to locate individuals who test positive for the virus so that contact tracing can begin. In addition, the tool could help healthcare providers ensure proper administration of vaccines with multiple doses.⁴⁴ If providers are unable to track

38 Cary Funk and Alex Tyson, “Intent to Get a COVID-19 Vaccine Rises to 60% as Confidence in Research and Development Process Increases,” Pew Research Center, December 3, 2020, <https://www.pewresearch.org/science/2020/12/03/intent-to-get-a-covid-19-vaccine-rises-to-60-as-confidence-in-research-and-development-process-increases/>.

39 Representatives of the CDC’s Vaccine Task Force and the NORC public health department described a potential role in sharing information. Information dissemination at post offices was also discussed in the OIG’s 2015 issue brief. See: USPS Office of Inspector General, *Issue Brief: The Postal Service’s Role in Delivering Wellness Services and Supplies*, Report No. RARC-IB-15-004, July 22, 2015, https://www.uspsig.gov/sites/default/files/document-library-files/2015/rarc-ib-15-004_the_postal_services_role_in_delivering_wellness_services_and_supplies_0.pdf.

40 “What to Expect,” CDC, December 23, 2020, <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/downloads/vaccines-facts-covid-vaccines-english-508.pdf>.

41 In 2019, a study from Indiana University found that the use of a standardized address led to improved patient matching. The Pew Charitable Trusts, which supported the study, then suggested that policies that govern how digital systems exchange information should be updated to support use of the Postal Service address format. See: Shaun Grannis et al., “Evaluating the effect of data standardization and validation on patient matching accuracy,” *Journal of the American Medical Informatics Association*, Vol. 26 (Issue 5), pp. 447–456, 2019, <https://doi.org/10.1093/jamia/ocy191> and Ben Moscovitch, “Standardized demographic data aids patient matching rates, study shows,” The Pew Charitable Trusts, March 22, 2019, <https://www.pewtrusts.org/en/research-and-analysis/articles/2019/03/22/standardized-demographic-data-aids-patient-matching-rates-study-shows>.

42 The text of S.4456, the Patient Matching Improvement Act of 2020, is available at: <https://www.congress.gov/bills/116/congress/senate-bill/4456/text>. The legislation would open up USPS’s address matching tool to health care organizations, encourage laboratories to use the standard, and mandate that electronic health records format addresses according to the standard. A letter written by Ben Moscovitch of the Pew Charitable Trusts states that use of the matching tool could lead to tens of thousands of additional correct patient record matches and reduce a hospital system’s unlinked records by 20 percent. See: Pew Charitable Trusts, November 12, 2020, <https://www.pewtrusts.org/-/media/assets/2020/11/pew-urges-congressional-leaders-to-consider-standardizing-addresses-in-electronic-health-records.pdf>.

43 “Senators Hassan, Cassidy Reintroduce Bipartisan Bill to Strengthen COVID-19 Response by Improving Electronic Health Record Systems,” Office of Senator Maggie Hassan, February 3, 2021, <https://www.hassan.senate.gov/news/press-releases/senators-hassan-cassidy-reintroduce-bipartisan-bill-to-strengthen-covid-19-response-by-improving-electronic-health-record-systems>.

44 The first two COVID-19 vaccines approved for distribution by the Food and Drug Administration require two doses, taken weeks apart.

recipients to verify that they returned for their second dose — and contact them if they have not — the benefits of effective vaccination are diminished.

Establishing Partnerships Between Local Postal Leaders and Community Organizations

Local community health organizations rely on networking to fulfill their missions. Local postal leaders could meet with representatives of health organizations to discuss how they might work together to serve the health and wellness needs of their community. It could be especially valuable for the Postal Service to participate in local and community health planning for emergencies, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, and other disaster relief efforts.

The Postal Service also has a long record of coordinating with emergency response agencies during times of critical need. For example, USPS has partnered with the American Red Cross following natural disasters such as hurricanes. Within this partnership, the Postal Service provides Change of Address forms to the Red Cross for distribution to disaster survivors who need them, and also establishes a separate file of completed Change of Address forms to help the Red Cross locate missing individuals and families or make contact with survivors who may need assistance.⁴⁵ The Postal Service could look for ways to provide similar assistance to health and wellness organizations on a local level.

Bridging the Digital and Healthcare Access Divide

Another challenge identified by health and wellness experts is the difficulty some populations face in accessing health services. Many health and wellness organizations have been consolidating facilities, leaving communities with fewer options for accessing health and wellness services. Specifically, rural areas may lack essential healthcare providers, such as specialist physicians, and people may have to drive long distances to find appropriate care. Many parts of rural

America have been deemed “health care deserts,” where there are very few medical professionals. One 11,000 square mile area of Texas, for instance, relies on one practicing doctor.⁴⁶ The access challenge, however, is not exclusively a rural issue. Urban areas also may experience a level of care that is not high enough to meet demand.⁴⁷ The COVID-19 pandemic contributes to the access problem, with patients more reluctant to visit health facilities in person for fear of contracting or spreading the virus.

Advancements in digital technology have helped address this physical access challenge, but there are millions of Americans who lack the technology or the digital literacy necessary to utilize telehealth solutions. This “digital divide” is prevalent in certain parts of the country where access to broadband is limited or unreliable. Low-income households, for instance, may struggle to afford reliable broadband connections at home. Additionally, older populations tend to be less comfortable with digital technology.⁴⁸ Marginalized populations — such as the homeless — also face barriers to access. The FCC reported that, as of the end of 2018, 5.6 percent of the population lacked access to reliable broadband Internet, but in rural and tribal areas that number was well over 20 percent.⁴⁹

The Postal Service could help communities overcome service access issues by expanding their customer monitoring services or facilitating access to telehealth technology.

Expanding the Carrier Alert Program

As previously noted, Carrier Alert is an opt-in service in which letter carriers watch for signs that postal customers could be in trouble. A representative from NALC suggested that Carrier Alert could potentially be expanded across the country and integrated into the Mobile Delivery Devices carriers use on the job, allowing a carrier to electronically report an unchecked mailbox or other signs of potential trouble.⁵⁰ The Postal Service could expand on the current Carrier Alert program

45 For more information on the Postal Service’s formal role in federal emergency response efforts, see: USPS Office of Inspector General, *The U.S. Postal Service and Emergency Response: A History of Delivering for the American Public*, Report No. RISC-WP-20-006, September 10, 2020, <https://www.uspsoidg.gov/document/us-postal-service-and-emergency-response-history-delivering-american-public>.

46 Eli Saslow, “Out Here, It’s Just Me”: In the Medical Desert of Rural America, One Doctor for 11,000 Square Miles,” *Washington Post*, September 28, 2019, www.washingtonpost.com/national/out-here-its-just-me/2019/09/28/fa1df9b6-deef-11e9-be96-6adb81821e90_story.html.

47 For instance, although the number of specialists per capita is three times higher in urban areas, it can be more difficult for Medicaid patients in urban areas to secure a medical appointment and for uninsured people to find a regular source of care. See: Yash S. Huijil et al., “Giving Urban Health Care Access Issues the Attention They Deserve in Telemedicine Reimbursement Policies,” *Health Affairs*, October 12, 2017, <https://www.healthaffairs.org/doi/10.1377/hlthlog.20171022.713615/full/>.

48 A July 2020 survey of older adults by the National Council on Aging reported that only 49 percent of respondents had broadband access, 39 percent had a tablet or computer, and 38 percent felt comfortable using the Internet. See: “The Impact of COVID-19 on Community-Based Organizations Serving Older Adults,” National Council on Aging, 2020.

49 Federal Communications Commission, 2020 Broadband Report, FCC 20-50, April 24, 2020, <https://docs.fcc.gov/public/attachments/FCC-20-50A1.pdf>, figure 4.

50 While there are no current policies that prohibit the expansion of Carrier Alert, the program would need to remain voluntary for letter carriers in order to not require negotiations and subsequent amendments to

by offering additional training for carriers. The Postal Service could work with community organizations, such as Senior Reach, to educate carriers on how to recognize warning signs during the course of their daily routes, as well as who to contact for assistance (see Appendix B for information on similar programs that some international posts have in place).

Senior Reach Program

Senior Reach is a collaboration between Jefferson Center for Mental Health, Seniors' Resource Center, and Mental Health Partners that educates communities on the needs of seniors, provides care management and mental health services, and connects older adults to community resources. The program operates in Colorado, Montana, and Michigan, helping communities identify the signs that an older resident may need behavioral health services or care before the situation becomes critical. Once in-need individuals are identified, Senior Reach offers to help engage them in available services.

Facilitating Access to Telehealth Technology

People who do not have readily available access to a medical professional may be able to use a connected device to communicate with a doctor or specialist via a telehealth platform. Telehealth can connect patients with a provider or specialist when none is available in their communities. While this is not the solution for every health or wellness problem, the technology is useful in many contexts and can help fill in gaps in the healthcare system.

As the COVID-19 pandemic gripped the nation and people were unable or unwilling to access in-person care at health facilities, telehealth consultations

with health professionals became considerably more widespread. Prior to the pandemic, less than one percent of patient medical experiences were conducted via telehealth. In April 2020, that number rose to 13.9 percent.⁵¹

Figure 6: Telehealth Session



Source: Getty Images.

Manufacturers are producing small, stand-alone kiosks where individuals would have some privacy and could connect to telehealth exams conducted by health professionals.⁵² While there are various models produced by different companies, all provide videoconference technology and may also include peripheral medical equipment such as digital stethoscopes, otoscopes, and ultrasounds.⁵³ These

any existing collective bargaining agreements between the Postal Service and the relevant union.

51 Ateev Mehrotra, et. al., "The Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Outpatient Care: Visits Return to Prepandemic Levels, but Not for All Providers and Patients," Commonwealth Fund, October 15, 2020, <https://www.commonwealthfund.org/publications/2020/oct/impact-covid-19-pandemic-outpatient-care-visits-return-prepandemic-levels>.

52 USPS Office of Inspector General, *Next Generation Connectivity: Postal Service Roles in 5G and Broadband Deployment*, Report No. RISC-WP-20-007, September 14, 2020, <https://www.uspsaig.gov/sites/default/files/document-library-files/2020/RISC-WP-20-007.pdf>.

53 CDC, "Using Telehealth to Expand Access to Essential Health Services during the COVID-19 Pandemic," June 10, 2020, <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/hcp/telehealth.html>.

kiosks can be found at public locations, such as retail pharmacies, government buildings, and airports.⁵⁴

Telehealth kiosks could be placed in select post offices, allowing individuals who otherwise could not take advantage of telehealth services to access medical care remotely.⁵⁵ Such an undertaking would be particularly valuable in underserved areas, such as remote communities where residents must travel long distances to visit healthcare providers.⁵⁶

The feasibility of placing telehealth kiosks in post offices would be subject to the characteristics of each individual postal facility. These kiosks would be targeted for deployment in areas where there was a demonstrated need for better access to telehealth and in facilities capable of hosting this technology and any attendant staff that may be required for its operation. Potential sites would need sufficient available space to host the kiosk without interfering with traditional postal business or inconveniencing postal customers. Further, candidate post offices would need access to fast and reliable broadband coverage, which can be an issue, particularly in rural areas.

A related opportunity that representatives of non-profit, private sector, and government health and wellness organizations suggested to the OIG would be for the Postal Service to partner with another organization to loan out and distribute connected devices to people who lack the technology to access telehealth services. The Postal Service could distribute devices, such as tablets, on behalf of partner organizations that allow the user to connect with their healthcare provider, to be returned after use. This distribution could occur through the mail or in-person transactions at participating post offices. This is similar to an existing program in which the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs partners with

the American Red Cross and Facebook to ship video communication devices to veterans.⁵⁷

Considerations for Implementation

The following considerations must be taken into account if the Postal Service explores strategic opportunities in the health and wellness sector.

Limitations in Offering Non-Postal Services and Partnerships

There are additional considerations regarding the types of organizations that the Postal Service can partner with (specifically, public versus private) and the types of activities that would need to be addressed. Per the Postal Accountability and Enhancement Act (PAEA) of 2006, any initiatives would be subject to the requirement that the Postal Service cannot provide non-postal services for a profit, apart from certain non-postal services that were being offered for profit prior to the passage of PAEA.⁵⁸

Under PAEA, however, the Postal Service can utilize its property in the role of a landlord, as exemplified by existing co-locations of cellular towers on postal properties.⁵⁹ Thus, undertaking initiatives that involve the sharing of space within postal facilities — such as co-locating telemedicine kiosks, or storing and serving as staging areas for the distribution of PPE — could be allowable. In addition, partnerships with other federal government agencies are generally permitted under law and likely to be accepted by the Postal Regulatory Commission.⁶⁰ Partnerships with private health and wellness entities could be more challenging to establish. Ultimately, any Postal Service activities in the health and wellness arena will need to be carefully weighed against the applicable statutes.

54 Phil Galewitz, "Kaiser: Your doctor will see you now — in this telemedicine kiosk," *USA Today*, June 18, 2016, <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/2016/06/18/kaiser-how-far-telemedicine-has-come/86084092/> and Fred Pennick, "Rite Aid Launches Telehealth Kiosks With RediClinic Express in Pennsylvania," *HIT Consultant*, July 30, 2019, <https://hitconsultant.net/2019/07/30/rite-aid-telehealth-kiosks-intouch-health/>.

55 These and other services would be provided subject to COVID-19 safety protocols until such time as the pandemic is no longer a pressing public health concern.

56 One example is the Veterans Health Administration's (VHA) Accessing Telehealth through Local Area Stations program. The VHA is working with Phillips and Walmart to establish locations for Veterans to access free broadband to connect to VA providers by video. The pilot program began prior to the COVID-19 pandemic but was temporarily shut down during the public health emergency. According to a VHA manager, the Postal Service had concerns about the space requirements for participating in a telehealth partnership. See: USPS Office of Inspector General, *Next Generation Connectivity: Postal Service Roles in 5G and Broadband Deployment*, Report No. RISC-WP-20-007, September 14, 2020, <https://www.uspsig.gov/sites/default/files/document-library-files/2020/RISC-WP-20-007.pdf>.

57 "Eligible Veterans can get free Portal," U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, April 15, 2020, <https://www.blogs.va.gov/VAntage/73756/eligible-veterans-can-get-free-portal/>.

58 Under the Postal Accountability and Enhancement Act, the Postal Service may only sell non-postal products or services to the public that were offered at the time the law was enacted (or January 1, 2006), and that the Postal Regulatory Commission authorized to continue. 39 U.S.C. § 404(e).

59 USPS Office of Inspector General, *Next Generation Connectivity: Postal Service Roles in 5G and Broadband Deployment*, Report No. RISC-WP-20-007, September 14, 2020, <https://www.uspsig.gov/sites/default/files/document-library-files/2020/RISC-WP-20-007.pdf>.

60 39 U.S.C. § 411 states that "[e]xecutive agencies ... are authorized to furnish property and services to them. The furnishing of property and services under this section shall be under such terms and conditions, including reimbursability, as the Postal Service and the head of the agency concerned shall deem appropriate."

Facility Space, Conditions, and Security Challenges

Any efforts to utilize the Postal Service's physical infrastructure to provide health and wellness services would require careful evaluation of individual postal facilities. One consideration would be the amount of free space available. Also, some facilities may not be well-suited for hosting health and wellness services. Another implementation consideration is the role Postal Service staff would play in the provision of these services. The Postal Service could just be a provider of space for providers to use, or it could be more involved, expanding the roles of Postal Service staff, depending on the nature of the service and partnership. Finally, given the need to keep the vaccines secure and to maintain them under exacting conditions at all times, storing COVID-19 vaccines at Postal Service facilities may require increased security in order to ensure their integrity.

Cost Considerations

Potential health or wellness partnerships or initiatives could include opportunities for cost coverage or cost recovery. Types of potential revenue models would include:

- Partnership fees: The Postal Service could take in revenue from partners for activities such as distributing health information and supplies or alerting wellness organizations about older adults in need.
- Renting underused space in postal facilities or on postal property: The Postal Service could take in revenue from organizations that arrange to use postal facility space for initiatives such as setting up telehealth kiosks or staging medical supplies.
- Individual fee for service: Individual consumers could also pay the Postal Service for the provision of services, such as letter carrier check-ins.
- Finally, government subsidies or other relief funding could help defray some or all of the cost of new health and wellness initiatives.

Conclusion

The United States Postal Service already plays a role in delivering health and wellness services to its customers. The Postal Service delivers prescriptions to those unwilling or unable to go pick them up in a store and has programs to observe certain signs — such as failure to collect incoming mail on a regular basis — that might indicate an individual needs help.

The COVID-19 pandemic has underscored the challenges that many health and wellness organizations face in trying to care for unserved or underserved populations. With its ubiquitous footprint throughout the country, the Postal Service is uniquely positioned to partner with many of these organizations to help them overcome some of the challenges they face in their ongoing operations, such as battling the pandemic, disseminating information about available local health care resources, and the lack of convenient access to health care services.

There are several new roles the Postal Service could play. The Postal Service has the infrastructure and core capabilities that make it a candidate to help the nation recover from the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as future public health emergencies that are yet unforeseen. Post offices could serve as a trusted source of information on the local availability of health resources, while postal workers could partner with community health organizations to help identify and respond to residents' needs. The Postal Service could share its extensive address standardization tool to help health providers better manage patient records. Finally, the Postal Service can help facilitate telehealth consultations for those who are unable to meet with a medical professional face-to-face.

Identifying and implementing effective partnerships between the Postal Service and other health and wellness organizations will require creativity and a forward-looking vision. The benefits from these services to the American public could be long-lasting and substantial.

Management's Comments

In Management's Comments, the Postal Service questioned whether it has the legal authority to charge an individual fee for the provision of services, such as letter carrier check-ins.

Evaluation of Management's Comments

The OIG recognizes the legal hurdles to a fee-for-service structure, but we maintain that this structure could be a path forward coupled with legislative reform or intragovernmental partnership. As the paper states in the "Limitations in Offering Non-Postal Services and Partnerships" section, per PAEA, any initiatives would be subject to the requirement that USPS cannot provide non-postal services for a profit; apart from certain non-postal services that were being offered for profit prior to the passage of the law. In addition, partnerships with other federal government agencies are generally permitted under law but would need to be approved by the Postal Regulatory Commission. While we acknowledge that the Postal Service may need to work with Congress for legislative reform to implement for-profit provisions, opportunities exist to increase the Postal Service's role in providing health services. We will therefore not amend the white paper.

Appendices

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Appendix A: Additional Information

Objectives, Scope, and Methodology

The objective of this project is to identify opportunities for the Postal Service to participate in the provision of health and wellness services in the United States, including any that may have emerged as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

There are three questions under this objective:

1. What roles has USPS played in meeting health and wellness needs?
2. What are the primary gaps in the services provided by wellness organizations, including (but not limited to) the provision of services to older Americans and disadvantaged communities?
3. What are the future opportunities for USPS to provide new health and wellness services, including partnerships with other organizations to move toward meeting these needs?

In addressing the objective, the OIG reviewed secondary research and interviewed subject matter experts and federal agency representatives.

- Reviewed secondary research. The OIG reviewed prior research conducted by OIG and other agency materials, as well as reviewing international posts' roles in the provision of health and wellness services. We also accessed publicly available information regarding the COVID-19 pandemic and efforts to combat it.
- Interviewed subject matter experts and federal agency representatives. In addition to speaking with Postal Service management and postal union representatives, the OIG spoke with several industry experts on public health and wellness issues. The OIG interviewed representatives from the following organizations/agencies:

- Private/Non-Profit Sector Organizations:
 - AARP
 - AcademyHealth
- American Red Cross Disaster Health Services
- American Red Cross Military and Veteran Caregiver Network
- American Telemedicine Association
- Cityblock Health
- Greystone Group
- A Major U.S. Pharmacy Chain
- National Community Pharmacists Association
- National Council on Aging
- NORC at the University of Chicago
- Senior Reach
- Universal Postal Union International Bureau
- Government agencies:
 - Health Resources and Services Administration Federal Office of Rural Health Policy
 - Centers for Disease Control and Prevention Office of the Associate Director for Policy and Strategy
 - Centers for Disease Control and Prevention Office of the Deputy Director for Public Health Service and Implementation Science
 - Centers for Disease Control and Prevention Disproportionately Affected Adult Populations
 - Centers for Disease Control and Prevention Vaccine Task Force
 - Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services Center for Medicaid and Medicaid Innovation, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services

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- Federal Communications Commission Connect2Health Task Force
 - North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services
 - U.S. Department of Agriculture National Institute of Food and Agriculture
 - United States Department of Veterans Affairs Telehealth Services
 - United States Department of Veterans Affairs Office of the Inspector General
- The OIG conducted work for this white paper in accordance with the Council of the Inspectors General on Integrity and Efficiency, Quality Standards for Inspection and Evaluation. We discussed our observations and conclusions with management on February 17, 2021, and included their comments where appropriate.

Prior Coverage

Report Title	Objective	Report Number	Final Report Date	Monetary Impact
Next Generation Connectivity: Postal Service Roles in 5G and Broadband Deployment	To determine whether there are roles the Postal Service can play to support 5G and broadband deployment, particularly to unserved and underserved areas.	RISC-WP-20-007	September 14, 2020	N/A
U.S. Postal Service and Emergency Response: A History of Delivering for the American Public	To describe the Postal Service’s role in the federal emergency response structure; identify select historical examples of how the Postal Service participated in emergency response; and describe how the Postal Service has participated in response to the COVID-19 pandemic	RISC-WP-20-006	September 10, 2020	N/A
Same-Day Delivery: Implications for the U.S. Postal Service	To thoroughly assess current customer interest in same-day delivery products.	RISC-WP-20-002	January 8, 2020	N/A
The Postal Service and Cities: A “Smart” Partnership	To discuss the development of smart city projects in the United States, describe the opportunities for Postal Service involvement, consider possible business models, and address implementation issues.	RARC-WP-16-017	September 26, 2016	N/A
Issue Brief: The Postal Service’s Role in Delivering Wellness Services and Supplies	To identify opportunities for the Postal Service to partner with wellness organizations to help fill gaps created by budget constraints.	RARC-IB-15-004	July 22, 2015	N/A

Appendix B: International Post Health and Wellness Initiatives

As postal operators around the world continue to face a reduction in traditional mail volumes, which is even more problematic during the pandemic, the need to adapt by way of innovations that improve performance is evident. Whether it is due to changing market needs or increased private sector competition, a number of international posts have been implementing cost-cutting measures and seeking new revenue streams in order to stay relevant to the customers they serve.

In some cases, these posts are leveraging their employees' daily presence in communities to increase their service offerings to include initiatives linked to health and wellness, especially as a way to cater to the needs of an aging population. The OIG's 2015 Issue Brief on health and wellness identified activities along these lines that were being undertaken or explored by two posts.⁶¹ For instance, La Poste in France has been expanding its presence in that nation's healthcare sector, which in 2015 included local services such as senior check-ins, as well as exploring the potential installation of telehealth kiosks in post offices. The OIG also learned as part of this previous research that Japan Post had a comparable program to provide welfare checks of the elderly.

For this current white paper, we wanted to understand what activities international posts are undertaking now, five years later, that are related to health and wellness, as well as to identify which of these initiatives potentially could be relevant to the U.S. Postal Service.⁶² For starters, we determined that La Poste's and Japan Post's check-in programs are still in place today, and both have expanded these services:

- France (La Poste) – Veiller sur mes parents/Watch over my parents: Letter carriers visit registered customers anywhere from one to six times per week in order to determine any special needs they may have. The cost starts at

- €19.90 per month, or about U.S. \$24. During the COVID-19 pandemic, La Poste's check-ins now include anyone staying at home, not just seniors.

- Japan (Japan Post) – Watch Over Service. This program, which costs 2,500 yen (U.S. \$24) per month, sends postal employees to visit elderly customers in order to report their living conditions to family members. Japan Post added a Phone Service and optional On-call Service as a way to provide greater support to families living separately.

Other international posts are offering similar senior check-in services, including:

- Ireland (An Post) – Home check-in: Family members can register older and vulnerable loved ones for this program, which relies on daily organic interactions between An Post letter carriers and customers. Any concerns that come up are forwarded to community support services. Since the pandemic began, carriers have been checking on all older and vulnerable individuals on their routes, especially in isolated areas. If support is needed, a carrier can recommend the customer call ALONE, a national organization for older people, or may call the ALONE Coronavirus helpline on their behalf.
- Jersey (Jersey Post) – Call & Check/Call & Check Lite: This initiative goes beyond just checking on isolated and elderly customers; letter carriers also deliver other essential items, including groceries and medications. Training is given on what sorts of things to look out for. While no formal medical care is provided, carriers are permitted to make referrals to other health and social service organizations, and even may arrange transport to registrants' medical appointments. In response to COVID-19, Jersey Post now also offers Call & Check Lite, which includes free phone check-ins twice weekly as part of a government initiative to stave off the pandemic.

61 USPS Office of Inspector General, *Issue Brief: The Postal Service's Role in Delivering Wellness Services and Supplies*, Report No. RARC-IB-15-004, July 22, 2015, https://www.uspsaig.gov/sites/default/files/document-library-files/2015/rarc-ib-15-004_the_postal_services_role_in_delivering_wellness_services_and_supplies_0.pdf.

62 It is important to note that there are differences in how the U.S. Postal Service operates in comparison to other international posts – for instance, some postal operators have been privatized – which could restrict USPS's ability to implement some of these initiatives. As well, there are legal limitations that may preclude the Postal Service's ability to undertake certain activities, including the Postal Accountability and Enhancement Act (PAEA) of 2006.

- Korea (Korea Post) – Night support to caregivers: Since 2008, Korea Post in partnership with the Korea Regional Self-Support Center Association has provided support to customers with no caregiver at night, which is when caregiving services are least likely to be available.
 - Belgium (bpost) – bclose: To help socially isolated older customers, bpost letter carriers visit registrant homes along their routes and ask a fixed set of questions to better understand their needs. Customer concerns are communicated to local social service agencies, which then assess the situation in order to offer them opportunities to socialize in the community.
 - United Kingdom (Royal Mail) – Safe & Connected trial: Based upon the success of Jersey Post's and La Poste's check-in programs, and in conjunction with the UK's stance on mitigating loneliness, this pilot supports older people who live alone or away from family. Letter carriers stop along their routes two times a week to ask registrants basic questions to determine their well-being, then let the appropriate support agencies know if someone feels lonely or needs help. The trial has had positive results and Royal Mail and its partners currently are looking to scale-up this service.
- The issue of social isolation, a problem especially among the elderly, has motivated several international posts to use physical mail or digital technology to provide older customers who live alone with extra help and support. For instance:
- Australia (Australia Post) – Senior Pen Pal Club. This program was created in partnership with the nation's council on aging to help older citizens stay connected through handwritten letters, which is especially important during the pandemic when human connection has diminished. The Club is available to senior organizations, such as nursing homes, senior citizen clubs, and others, but not yet individuals.
 - Japan (Japan Post) – iPads for elderly: Japan Post teamed up with IBM and Apple in 2015 to make specially-equipped iPads available to senior citizens as a way to stay in touch with family members, as well as to engage with healthcare providers and other social services.
 - Italy (Poste Italiane) - Empowering Safer homes for SENiors through Connected technologies: ESSENCE provides digital devices to seniors at home or in nursing homes as a way to reduce social isolation and ensure their wellbeing. A network of sensors remotely monitors the senior's activity and measures whether they are experiencing an emergency — for example, it could detect if they have fallen or if their front door has been left open. The system then digitally reports problems to medical helpdesks or other service providers and general practitioners.

Some postal operators are beginning to diversify their business models to include e-health. For this type of offering, a post acts as an intermediary between its customers and the country's health care system by providing services such as secure access to electronic health records (EHRs) and test results, the ability to make online appointments and payment of medical services, and the like. E-health initiatives can generate revenue based on the post's information technology infrastructure, whereby monthly subscription fees or a one-time transaction fee is charged to the customer.

- France (La Poste) – La Poste eHealth mobile app: eHealth streamlines how patients and healthcare providers interact with each other by providing access to digital technology that ensures real-time information exchange. The app works in conjunction with patient EHRs that are available with the French health system. Hospitals, pharmacies, clinics, and research programs have signed on to this program.⁶³

- Switzerland (Swiss Post) – Post e-Health Service: As Switzerland moves towards mandatory EHRs for all citizens, this initiative provides registered customers and authorized healthcare professionals with secure access to important information such as medication lists, discharge reports, and allergy information.

Additional examples of what foreign posts are doing in health and wellness include:

- Canada (Canada Post) – Delivery Accommodation: Canada Post helps customers with functional limitations access mail and parcels from their mailbox.
- Belgium (bpost) – Mapping air quality: bpost's delivery vans are equipped with sensors to continuously map the air quality in Antwerp.

⁶³ Related services from La Poste's subsidiaries help to facilitate home care, such as installing medical equipment in patients' homes, delivery of meals and medications, and a program that adds remote assistance as part of La Poste's check-in service. For more information, see: "CES 2019: La Poste, A Major Player in e-Health," Le Groupe La Poste, February 2, 2019, <https://www.groupelaposte.com/en/article/ces-2019-la-poste-a-major-player-in-e-health>.

Appendix C: Management's Comments

JOSHUA D. COLIN, PH.D.
VICE PRESIDENT, DELIVERY OPERATIONS



March 9, 2021

KELLY THRESHER
ACTING DIRECTOR, RISC

SUBJECT: Partnering for Health: Potential Postal Service Roles in Health and Wellness (Project Number 2021RISC002)

Thank you for providing the Postal Service with the opportunity to review and comment on the subject white paper.

Under the **Facilitating Access to Telehealth Technology, Cost Considerations** section the following potential revenue model was suggested.

"Individual fee for service: Individual consumers could also pay the Postal Service for the provision of services, such as letter carrier check-ins".

After an internal review of the final draft there is a question if the Postal Service has legal authority to charge a fee for this kind of service. We are recommending this language be deleted.

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