



UNITED STATES GENERAL ACCOUNTING OFFICE  
WASHINGTON, D.C. 20548

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GENERAL GOVERNMENT  
DIVISION

MAR 9 1976

Mr. James R. Braughton  
Assistant Postmaster General  
for Delivery Services  
U.S. Postal Service

Dear Mr. Braughton:

The General Accounting Office has completed its assessment of the Service's vehicle safety program. We believe that greater compliance at the local level with existing national policies and the strengthening of certain national policies would do much to further the Service's efforts to reduce vehicle accidents.

Our review was conducted at Headquarters and seven postal installations in the Eastern, Central, and Western Postal Regions. Selected aspects of the vehicle safety program were tested at each location by a review of driver, safety, and operational records and through discussions with Service officials. The results of our review are discussed more fully in the following sections.

INTRODUCTION

The United States Postal Service has a fleet of approximately 117,000 vehicles and 250,000 employees authorized to operate them. Service drivers have experienced a steadily decreasing number of vehicle accidents and injuries since the creation of the Service in 1971. The Service recorded 19,786 accidents and 2,097 injuries for fiscal year 1972. By fiscal year 1975, the number of accidents had been reduced to 10,408 and the number of injuries to 1,573. While the number of Service vehicle accidents has dropped, the direct cost of accidents remains high. Property damage costs in 1975 totaled \$5.05 million and injury costs were \$1.2 million. Indirect costs, which include such items as equipment downtime, retraining, and administration, are estimated by Service officials to be at least equal to the property damage costs.

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A more complete picture of the Service's accident record is depicted in the tables below:

	<u>Vehicle accident statistics</u>			
	<u>Fiscal year</u>			
	<u>1972</u>	<u>1973</u>	<sup>a</sup> <u>1974</u>	<u>1975</u>
Number of accidents	19,786	16,328	12,398	10,408
Total number of miles driven	1,203,194,439	1,209,977,193	1,265,814,398	1,288,420,987
Accidents per million miles	16.4	13.5	9.8	8.1

<sup>a</sup> Beginning in 1974, only accidents involving \$100 or more in property damages were reported for inclusion in Service-wide statistics.

	<u>Injury and property damage costs</u>			
	<u>Fiscal year</u>			
	<u>1972</u>	<u>1973</u>	<sup>a</sup> <u>1974</u>	<u>1975</u>
Number of injuries	2,097	1,840	1,767	1,573
Injury costs	\$1,681,523	\$1,458,000	\$1,385,832	\$1,161,240
Motor vehicle property damage	\$5,269,130	\$5,252,409	\$5,380,496	\$5,046,270

<sup>a</sup> Beginning in 1974, only accidents involving \$100 or more in property damages were reported for inclusion in Service-wide statistics.

Although some of the improvement in the Service's accident rate can be attributed to the change in accident recordkeeping beginning in 1974, the Service continued to show improvement after this change by registering a decrease in 1975 compared to 1974.

The Service has expended a great deal of time and money on a safety program emphasizing the importance of reducing the number of vehicle accidents. Its declining accident rate

demonstrates that accidents can be prevented. By strengthening the day-to-day administration of safety requirements, the Service should be able to reduce accidents further.

NEED TO INSURE COMPLIANCE  
WITH ESTABLISHED POLICIES

Local Service managements' adherence to policies and procedures governing driver selection, training, and supervision varies markedly from installation to installation. While the impact that noncompliance with policies and procedures has on the Service's accident rate is impossible to measure, we believe that stricter adherence would help insure driver compliance with safe driving practices and should result in further reduction in the Service's accident rate.

Need to evaluate drivers' records  
before issuing operators' permits

Existing policies of the Postal Service require all drivers to possess both a valid State operator's license and a U.S. Government Motor Vehicle Operator's Identification Card (operator permit). For the initial issuance of this operator permit, the local Service official in charge of vehicle operations is required to verify the acceptability of an applicant's past driving experience before the applicant can be given a road test. The government operator permit is to be issued after a road test is successfully completed.

Our review of hiring procedures showed that at four installations applicants' driving records were reviewed after government operator permits were issued. At these installations, the period between the issuance of operator permits and the Service officials' reviews of driving records ranged from 1 day to more than 3 months. It is evident that this practice can result in hiring and using a driver with an unsatisfactory driving record. As shown in the table below, about 75 percent of the new drivers at one installation received their operator permits 1 or more months before their State driving records were reviewed.

Time lag between issuance of government  
operator permits and review of  
State driving records  
for drivers licensed in  
July through December 1973

<u>Elapsed time</u>	<u>Number of drivers</u>	<u>Percent of drivers</u>
Less than 1 month	15	25.4
One to 3 months	18	30.5
More than 3 months	<u>26</u>	<u>44.1</u>
Total	<u>59</u>	<u>100.0</u>

Local Service officials said they could always fire new drivers if, after they were hired, their driving records were found to be unacceptable. They told us also that operator permits were issued before driving records were reviewed because the drivers were needed immediately and it took a few weeks to obtain driving records from the States. However, officials at two installations we visited required applicants to provide a recent copy of their official State driving records before they administered the road test. According to these officials, applicants can easily obtain their driving records through local police departments and State motor vehicle agencies. Requiring applicants to provide a copy of their driving records before taking a road test would appear to be an effective way of insuring that prospective vehicle operators have valid State driver's licenses and histories of safe driving before they are permitted to operate Service vehicles.

Need for timely  
remedial training

The purpose of remedial training is to improve the performance of operators or to offset specific driving weaknesses. According to existing policy, any vehicle operator involved in an accident that his supervisor considered avoidable with good driving practices must be given remedial training. It also states that remedial training must be timely if it is to be effective.

Our review of vehicle operator records at four installations showed that operators were not always given remedial training following preventable accidents.

Additionally, remedial training given to some drivers was not timely. The records showed that the time between accidents and remedial training ranged from 4 days to almost 4 months. Service safety officials cited the reluctance of line managers to remove drivers from their duties as a reason the remedial training was not given or was not timely.

Need to provide  
improvement training

Service policy requires management to plan and regularly schedule driver improvement training to emphasize the use of defensive driving in the prevention of accidents both on and off the job.

Three of the installations we visited had no driver improvement training programs. Service training officials told us that the type and amount of improvement training to be given drivers was the responsibility of management at each post office. As a result, the type and availability of improvement and refresher training given by the Service has not been consistent.

Need to evaluate drivers' physical condition  
before reviewing operator permits

To insure drivers are in good physical condition, the Service requires them to complete a physical fitness inquiry form every 3 years before their operator permits are renewed. This form is to be reviewed by a Service official before renewing a permit. Employees who indicate they have certain medical problems are to be referred to a doctor to determine whether the problem will affect their ability to drive.

Officials at two installations reviewed the physical fitness forms after they renewed operator permits. In addition, officials at two installations did not refer to , . physicians those drivers who indicated they had physical problems.

Noncompliance with these procedures could allow operators with physical impairments to continue driving when they represent a hazard to themselves and the public.

Policies on physical examinations for  
operators of large trucks should be strengthened

The Service requires prospective employees to pass a pre-employment physical examination before being hired.

Applicants take a Service medical form to a doctor of their own choice for the examination. The form lists, among other things, the physical requirements of the position being applied for. The doctor, after examining the applicant, will determine whether the applicant is capable of performing the duties of the position. The Service renews operator permits every 3 years but does not require drivers to pass a physical examination after the initial pre-employment examination, unless the drivers tell the Service they have certain physical problems (see p. 5). Therefore, drivers once hired may never have another physical examination during their careers.

In contrast, the Department of Transportation's (DOT's) Federal Motor Carrier Safety Regulations, governing the physical qualifications that commercial drivers involved in intercity operations must meet, require drivers to be medically examined every 2 years. Drivers on the Service's contractor-operated star routes are subject to DOT's requirements and must pass a medical examination every 2 years while Service drivers, performing comparable work, do not.

We believe that the Service's requirements for drivers of large trucks should be comparable to those that apply to drivers in the private sector.

#### More recognition needed for safety award recipients

According to the Vehicle Service Handbook, safe driving awards in the Service are designed to stimulate competition and provide incentives to both management and drivers to improve accident prevention performance.

All of the Service facilities that we visited participated in

- The Regional Director's Annual Award for Meritorious Performance in Motor Vehicle Safety.
- The National Safety Council's National Fleet Safety Contest.
- The National Safety Council's Safe Driver Award.

Winning drivers in these contests receive certificates and/or lapel pins. Based on our discussions with several drivers and their supervisors, the awards and contests provide little incentive for improved accident prevention. Drivers complained that the awards were simply handed to

them before or after their work shift with no ceremony and without adequate recognition. Some drivers and supervisors suggested to us that a system of monetary awards would provide much more incentive for safe driving.

Private industry also recognizes the importance of safety awards and contests. While the approach of private companies varies, the objective is the same--to make drivers aware of their driving practices by creating a desire in them to compile an accident free driving record. This is done by making the reward sufficiently attractive either psychologically or economically. For example, one company we visited participated in the National Safety Council's National Fleet Safety Contest. It held an annual dinner at which the drivers received awards from their managers and pictures were taken for local newspapers. Another company developed an awards program which allowed drivers to select gifts commensurate with the number of years of accident-free driving.

We believe there is a need for the Service to provide high visibility and recognition to drivers with proven safe driving records in order to motivate other drivers to be more safety conscious.

#### RECOMMENDATIONS

To further reduce the Service's vehicle accident rate, we recommend that the Assistant Postmaster General for Delivery Services

- re-emphasize to managers the importance of (1) complying with established policies and procedures governing driver selection and training, (2) reviewing drivers' physical inquiry forms before operator permits are renewed and (3) referring drivers with potentially impaired physical ability to a physician for examination;
- require periodic physical examinations for drivers of large vehicles to insure their continued ability to perform safely;
- establish the minimum level of improvement training local managers are required to provide; and
- establish guidelines for safety awards and contests that will insure adequate recognition for drivers with safe driving records.

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We wish to express our appreciation for the cooperation and assistance extended to us by Service officials during our review.

Sincerely yours,

  
John Landicho  
Associate Director