

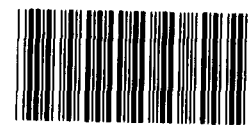


United States
General Accounting Office
Washington, D.C. 20548

General Government Division

92-0411

April 8, 1992



146334

The Honorable William S. Broomfield
House of Representatives

Dear Mr. Broomfield:

This is to inform you of our final conclusions on Postal Service preparedness for handling tragedies and its performance following the November 14, 1991, tragedy at the post office in Royal Oak, MI. Our overall assessment is that the Service deserves high marks for its well-organized response to employee and victim family needs in the aftermath of the tragedy.

In our June 1988 report, How the Postal Service Dealt With the Edmond, Oklahoma Tragedy, (GAO/GGD-88-78), we said that the Postal Service should develop and have in place a contingency plan to include principles of crisis management for dealing with the effects of traumatic events and disasters on their operations, employees, and customers. The Postal Service's Detroit Division and its post office at Royal Oak both had crisis management plans responsive to this recommendation in place before the November 1991 shootings. The existence of these plans, and their prompt implementation by postal officials with responsibilities under the plan, resulted in a well-organized response that stood in striking contrast to the situation we described in our report on the tragedy in Edmond, Oklahoma.

At Royal Oak, trauma counseling for victims' families and for postal employees was available from about 75 to 80 counselors and psychologists representing about 15 different agencies and organizations including the Postal Service. Counseling services, contracted for by the Postal Service, are still available to family members and postal employees.

To take care of financial needs, a Postal Service team of benefits specialists began, shortly after the tragedy, gathering data on entitlements and amounts due the families of the deceased employees. The team members discussed the entitlements with family members, initiated applications for them, and coordinated with responsible agencies to expedite the approval/payment processes.

GAO/GGD-92-4R, USPS Crisis Management

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Payment of entitlements started on November 21, 1991, with victim families receiving a check for earned salary and vacation time. Except as noted below, all other entitlements including monthly annuities were paid before the end of January 1992. The exceptions are:

- one family's life insurance check is delayed because there are multiple claimants for the benefits, a situation which may need to be settled by litigation,
- one family delayed application for a monthly annuity until January 27, 1992, and
- three families have not received their lump sum refund of contributions to the retirement systems administered by the Office of Personnel Management (OPM). One family received payment on March 9. As of March 27, payment of one family's claim had been authorized by an OPM examiner. The other two were being reviewed with authorization for payment expected within two weeks.

The Postal Service's response to the families' financial needs was also quite generous. Voluntary payments were made for funeral expenses and not-yet-earned lump sum merit pay increases. The Postal Service paid the families the difference between the actual funeral costs, and any death benefits amounts paid by other agencies such as Social Security and the Department of Labor. The Service's funeral expense payments ranged between \$7,600 and \$8,000. The merit pay amounts ranged from about \$725 to \$1,000.

To supplement existing instructions on crisis management, the Assistant Postmaster General, Employer Relations Department intends to have the involved staff record their experiences at Royal Oak in a lessons learned paper.

We are still at work on two further elements of your request to us: (1) monitoring the Postal Inspection Service's investigation of working conditions that led to the tragedy at Royal Oak; and (2) analyzing the validity of the Postal Service's reported measurements of customer satisfaction with the services it provides.

92-0411

If you or your staff have questions or need additional information on the above matters please call me on (202) 275-8676.

Sincerely yours,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "L. Nye Stevens". The signature is written in black ink and is positioned below the typed name.

L. Nye Stevens
Director, Government Business
Operations Issues