

Save the Postal Service: Congress must protect the agency for years to come

USPS provides a noble and essential service.

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By the Editorial Board / Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

The U.S. Postal Service is on the brink of collapse. The agency warned Congress that it will run out of money within the next several months, placing about 630,000 jobs at risk, without action from the White House and Congress. Postmaster General Megan Brennan told the House Oversight and Reform Committee that the Postal Service needs \$75 billion in cash, grants and loans to sustain its operations.

Congress should fund this request and the White House should support it, ensuring a noble and essential service can continue to serve this country. And, when the coronavirus crisis is in the rearview mirror, work should begin to add services that can improve the utility of the Postal Service and ensure its longevity.

The Postal Service traces its roots back as far as 1775, when Benjamin Franklin was named the first postmaster general. Postal services were even enshrined in Article I of the U.S. Constitution. The Post Office Department was then formally created in 1792. Over the course of the nation's history, it has undergone several reconfigurations, but the core mission has remained the same: providing the nation with reliable, affordable, universal mail service.

And its service is universal. Whereas private carriers, such as FedEx or UPS, are under no obligation to operate unprofitable delivery services for rural customers, the U.S. Postal Service provides for every corner of the country. Profitable routes in big cities subsidize less lucrative — but still essential — deliveries to rural communities.

The Postal Service remains a very popular organization. In fact, a 2019 Gallup poll found that it is the most popular federal agency — 74% of respondents believed the Postal Service is doing an excellent job.

The agency is also the country's second-largest employer, deploying one of the country's most diverse workforces. Minorities constitute 39% of the workforce; women, 40%; and veterans, more than 20%. The pay and benefits are decent, affording people of all backgrounds, experience and skill an opportunity to make a reasonable living.

But the agency has become a frequent target of privatization zealots, particularly in the past couple of decades. The Postal Service has been saddled with unique and cumbersome requirements that have significantly affected its financial standing. For example, a 2006 bill, only recently rolled back, required the agency to prefund the health care benefits of future retirees at least through 2056, with annual payments in excess of \$5 billion to the U.S. Treasury.

This unprecedented mandate has almost single-handedly caused the Postal Service to lose money over the past 13 years; in 2019, 83% of the agency's losses came from the payments.

These manufactured difficulties have made it easier for some politicians, including President Donald Trump, to call for the privatization of the Postal Service, though public support for the service has stymied such efforts. But the coronavirus crisis has opened the window for privatization to potentially become a reality, imperiling the agency's reliable and universal service, as well as the lives of its workforce.

Congress must protect the Postal Service. It is the voice of the people and the people want the agency to survive. And Mr. Trump, who has threatened to veto stimulus legislation that contains funding for the Postal Service, must not be allowed to strong-arm the agency into failure.

Looking down the road, the Postal Service should remain free of unique financial burdens so that it can continue to serve all the people of the United States. And new services, such as postal banking, should be considered. Sixty percent of post offices are located in ZIP codes with only one or no bank branches; these facilities could provide yet another essential service for underserved communities.

But for that to come to pass, the agency must survive this current threat. Few services, if any, are as deserving of assistance as the U.S. Postal Service, and Congress should ensure that it is protected.