



A Discussion with U.S. Postal Service Inspector General Tammy Whitcomb Hull

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Tammy Whitcomb Hull is the Inspector General of the U.S. Postal Service (USPS). She leads a staff of approximately 1,000 that does investigations and audit work, integral to ensuring the proper operation of USPS.

Several factors have made the work of the USPS Office of Inspector General (USPS OIG) even more important. These include the pandemic, the rise in mail-in voting, and the implementation of USPS's 10-year strategic plan, *Delivering for America*.

For the six months ended March 31, USPS OIG issued 130 recommendations which identified \$627 million in questioned costs, potential revenues, and ways in which funds could be better used. The USPS OIG also made 448 arrests.



Tammy Whitcomb Hull
Inspector General, United States Postal Service

USPS OIG operates with one employee for every 661 in USPS. It returns \$15 for every \$1 in their budget, making it one of, if not the most, efficient Inspector General offices in the federal government.

The Lexington Institute's Paul Steidler spoke with Inspector General Whitcomb Hull about important issues facing USPS OIG and its mission.

STEIDLER: In a nutshell what is the mission of the U.S. Postal Service Office of Inspector General?

WHITCOMB HULL: Our mission is to ensure the efficiency, accountability, and integrity of the United States Postal Service. We work hard to make sure there is public confidence in the Postal Service and how they operate. We look for economies and efficiencies in operations, ways that money can be saved, or things that could be done to improve the bottom line. In looking at cost effectiveness of the programs we also look for inefficiencies in the way things are being done. And then we look to prevent fraud, waste, and abuse.

We have a significant law enforcement function within the Postal Service, so we investigate criminal activity primarily by postal employees. So that's it in a nutshell.

STEIDLER: How will the recently enacted Postal Service Reform Act impact your office? Will it change how you operate?

WHITCOMB HULL: The biggest direct impact is we now have responsibility to become the Inspector General of the Postal Regulatory Commission. We are currently working on how to absorb those responsibilities into our organization. The Postal Regulatory Commission is a much smaller operation than the Postal Service, so it won't have significant impacts on what we do, but we have to adjust the way we do things.

The Act also requires us to consult with the Postal Regulatory Commission (PRC) on their flats study. We have done audit work in the past on inefficiencies in the way the Postal Service processes flats. So, we will coordinate with them (the PRC), provide them our work, answer any questions, and work with them on that flats study.

We also have a new role related to the Postal Service's requirement to provide annual data on cost, revenues, rates, and quality of service, associated with non-postal products. The Act requires us to audit the data collection and procedures the Postal Service uses to collect and report this information. We are already required by law to look at the systems that are used in the ratemaking process for regular postal services, so we will adjust for that to include non-postal products.

And then we'll be looking at key financial impacts to the Postal Service, things like Medicare integration and the elimination of healthcare prefunding. We will be doing audit work and research work in those areas. It is not directly required by the new law, but it is part of our normal course of business.

STEIDLER: *Are there certain issues that will be higher priorities in 2022? And relatedly, to what extent are you able to identify areas for investigation and to what extent do you have to react to alleged crimes and inefficiencies brought to your attention?*

WHITCOMB HULL: It's a great question. Some of our work we can plan and some of it is in response to requests. For our audit work in 2022, service performance will continue to be a big area of focus.

Recently in the past year or so, we have changed how we have done some of our field audit work, that is work outside the Washington, D.C. area. This has enabled us to become more strategic and less reactive. Previously, when we would get a request, such as from a Member of Congress, or we saw something in the data that would want us to get on a plane, we would do that.

Now, though, we are emphasizing a more strategic, comprehensive approach.

Often, for example, we would be going out to look at scanning at a certain post office or delivery issues in a postal area. We would get out there and do our work. And we would often see the causes of the problems would be outside of the facility or area we were visiting.

With the recent Postal Service reorganization, they now have lines of sight from delivery units and plants all the way up to headquarters. We were concerned that resolving issues in the field might become more challenging with the new organizational structure if we continued to operate as we had.

So, we changed how we do our field work. Instead of just flying out to look at a delivery unit or plant, we decided to have more geographic focus. When we go in the field, we now look at plants and several delivery units surrounding them so that we have a more comprehensive assessment.

Problems between the delivery units and the plants may be in the transportation or in the scanning at the plant. What appears in the data to be a delivery problem at a unit, may be a plant problem. With this new approach, we get a more comprehensive analysis. We are targeting certain geographic areas for this work, based on data analysis, as well as suggestions from the Postal Service and other stakeholders.

As the Postal Service continues to roll out the Delivering for America initiatives this work is going to be especially critical because the changes impact all Americans. Making sure that these initiatives are rolled out effectively is important for us in 2022.

For investigations, we must be responsive to complaints and have ongoing program areas, such as narcotics. Almost one-fifth of our work is focused on postal employees that might be involved with trafficking of narcotics through the mail. We also focus on health care fraud through the Postal Service's workers comp program because that has a real impact on the Postal Service's bottom line. They spend up to \$2 billion a year on workers compensation. So, looking for provider fraud and claimant fraud is also a big area of focus.

We are also focusing more this year on sexual harassment, and the issues around that, in both our audit and investigations areas.

As far as reactive versus proactive, we get a lot of cases through our very, very active hotline. We also have an aggressive analytics program. We do a lot of data analytics around the Postal Service's extensive data to identify where problems are occurring. This leads to both audits and criminal investigations.

Customer complaint data, for example, helps to identify potential problems with specific carriers and plant employees where maybe internal mail theft is occurring. But we also use it to identify inefficiencies. Our analytics have become more and more a source of both our investigative and audit work.

STEIDLER: What steps should Congress take to make the U.S. Postal Service Office of Inspector General even stronger?

WHITCOMB HULL: The number one thing Congress can do is to fund us at the levels that we need to do our work. Even though our money comes from the Postal Service and not the U.S. Treasury, our budget goes through the appropriations process. So, Congress sets our funding level each year.

We are one of the leanest IG (Inspector General) offices in government. We have about one employee for every 661 Postal Service employees. We have a strong return on investment. In 2021, we returned \$15 in impact for every \$1 invested in our budget. The money that we get from our investigations area alone more than covers our annual budget.

Our budget has been pretty flat in the last 10 years, until this past year. When you have a flat budget in government, you in effect get smaller.

This past year we did receive an increase in our budget, and we greatly appreciate that. We are using it very efficiently and effectively to cover the changes the Postal Service is experiencing, which increase the need for oversight.

The Postal Service is in a time of change. It is still facing challenges like employee availability, service performance, and financial stability. Increased oversight is necessary due to the many changes as they roll out their 10-year *Delivering for America* plan.

Our work becomes especially important to ensure that service is maintained and that lower costs and other positive changes from the Postal Service's plan are realized. Increased funding is important to cover the expanded oversight work.

STEIDLER: *Your office's [semi-annual report to Congress](#), issued on June 2, 2022, lists \$627 million in recommendations pertaining to questionable costs, potential revenues, and funds that could be put to better use. It covers the six-month period ending March 31, 2022. What steps and options do you have to push the U.S. Postal Service to implement these recommendations?*

WHITCOMB HULL: First, the reports themselves are important for helping to hold the Postal Service accountable.

We have an official resolution process when the Postal Service disagrees with our findings. We don't just go away if the Postal Service disagrees with our recommendations and does not want to implement them.

If Postal Service management disagrees with the recommendations or is non-responsive in their written comments to us, we initiate the formal resolution process. Within 30 days we have a meeting at the next executive level within the Postal Service to talk about potential resolution actions. Our collective goal is to work on an action that is responsive to the reported issues.

Most of the time, the issues are resolved when they are elevated to the next level. If that does not happen, though, we have a further escalation process. There have been very few times when matters have gone to the Postmaster General and the U.S. Postal Service Board of Governors, but we have that option as well.

In our semi-annual report to Congress, we also report on unresolved matters. We can also always go to Congress to talk about unresolved matters as well.

STEIDLER: *It seems like your office must strike a difficult balance in working with the U.S. Postal Service (USPS), that is you must rigorously investigate it while you are part of it. What is your working relationship like with USPS and how do you strike that balance?*

WHITCOMB HULL: That's the challenge that every Office of Inspector General in government faces. Our independence is essential, our touchstone and why we exist.

Keeping the lines of communication open is important. I meet regularly with the Postmaster General and with the Governors. Our senior-level staff also meets regularly with the leadership at the Postal Service. The Postal Service and its Office of Inspector General have a shared goal: ensuring an efficient, well-run Postal Service. So, even though we are seen as the watchdog, and we are, we and the Postal Service have the same goals, though we have different roles to play.

One of the challenges the Postal Service has with our work is that we are looking for opportunities for improvements and, when we find certain problems, these must be publicly reported. So that can make for a challenging relationship, even though we do that as professionally as possible.

Also, the Postal Service touches every American household and business almost every day. This gives us an opportunity to do oversight work that has a real impact on Americans.

STEIDLER: If someone suspects waste, fraud, or abuse at the Postal Service, how can they best contact, or notify, the Office of Inspector General? And can they do so anonymously?

WHITCOMB HULL: The best way is to go to our website www.uspsoig.gov/ and look for the red box at the top. You can't miss it. It says, "Report Fraud, Waste, and Abuse." You just click there and up comes a screen that you can fill out. The online process is the best way. You can also mail complaints to our office:

Attn.: Hotline
U.S. Postal Service Office of Inspector General
1735 North Lynn Street
Arlington, VA 22209

You can report issues anonymously and confidentially. We encourage people, though, to provide us their contact information. Sometimes when we get anonymous complaints it would have been really helpful to have been able to contact the person making the report to follow-up. With a confidential report, where contact information is provided, we can follow-up with questions and issues that may arise. We also welcome anonymous reports.

We get a lot of complaints. As the Postal Service touches every American household almost every day, we do receive many complaints through our hotline. Some of these that involve service concerns or related issues we will send over to the Postal Service where they can best be addressed. But if there are issues that fall in our space of looking for fraud, waste, and abuse, we will carefully evaluate every complaint that we receive to look for what actions we can take.

STEIDLER: What have we not covered in this discussion that you would like to address?

WHITCOMB HULL: We are doing a lot to improve transparency, looking for the best ways to be transparent, to make it easier for people to better understand and grasp the importance of our work.

On our website last summer, we launched a new page that features an interactive map displaying the [quarterly service performance data](#) that the Postal Service reports to the Postal Regulatory Commission. This started us thinking about what else we could do to be more transparent. A month or two ago we launched five new web pages that are designed to make it easier for stakeholders to navigate our website.

On our website, there is a prominent tab at the top, [Featured Work](#), that has several new, interesting web pages, including [Upcoming Audit Work](#). This section gives the public an opportunity to send us information related to audit work that we can consider.

I talked earlier about our localized geographic work. Readers can find information about that work and how it impacts Americans in the [Field Operations Reviews](#) section. You can see cases, for example, where we have been at a delivery unit and reported on the ceiling falling down or a pothole in the parking lot. The Postal Service will send us pictures of what and how they fixed something. So, when we close the recommendation, we show the before and after pictures.

Also, in the “Featured Work” tab is a section [Closed Investigations](#). There's not a lot on our website about our investigations, though we spend most of our budget on investigations. The “Closed Investigations” section shows those investigations across the country on a map. You can scroll over an area, such as Memphis or Fort Lauderdale, to see the type of work we have done in recent years.

We also have a new page called [Focus On](#) which will cover various subjects. The first one is about the importance of the Postal Service in rural areas.

Finally, we have a section in “Featured Work” called [Did You Know](#). It provides brief, high-level answers to commonly asked questions about the Postal Service, including things like, “Is the Postal Service a business or a public service?”

We are excited about our new transparency efforts. It is part of our mission and making what we do, and the Postal Service does, clear to the American public.

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