

NEWSPAPERS

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The destination delivery unit, or DDU, is the final stop in the U.S. Postal Service network that a package takes prior to delivery. Often referred to as the Last Mile, packages arriving at a DDU are sorted to carrier routes and sent out for delivery.

Starting back in late summer, Galer said, COVID-19 began taking its toll on delivery of newspapers that fall into periodical and marketing mail classifications and are sent by mail.

Publishers throughout Illinois are saying much the same thing.

"It's ridiculous, this is costing us circulation every month," said Greg Hoskins, whose company, Better Newspapers, produces titles throughout midstate Illinois, and in Missouri.

Galer recalls the story of a woman from Belleville who received two of his Hillsboro-based November papers in late March.

"We do the management for 10 papers here in our office at Hillsboro. The girl who handles our subscriptions, half to two-thirds of her work anymore is fielding complaints from people not getting their newspapers. The out-of-county circulation has taken a huge hit. I imagine we've lost 30 percent."

He added: "We've always had a few service issues. But the whole system has just crumbled since last fall."

One Metro East postal official told the Illinois Business Journal that COVID-19 did impact the manpower at distribution centers.

However, in a conversation with Postmaster General Louis DeJoy, publisher Galer came away disappointed in the reaction he got.

"The National Newspaper Association has been working postal issues it seems like my whole career. We had the conference with (DeJoy) about a month ago, and it made me sad. He just wasn't aware of any service issues involving newspapers, which defies logic. He promised to get stuff done, but they are just so

inundated with problems I don't think they know how to have a solution."

Sam Fisher, president and CEO of the Illinois Press Association, said he has "heard stories" from several newspapermen.

"There were a lot of problems over Christmas. At the regional (mail) center in St. Louis there was semitrailer after trailer of mail sitting there that they just couldn't get processed. I think it's gotten a little bit better but it's not where it needs to be."

With most newspapers, Fisher said, the principal circulation is within the paper's core market area.

"What a lot of newspapers are doing is filing all their paperwork at one post office and then physically dropping the papers at individual post offices to get expedited delivery," he said. "It doesn't go into the normal mail stream. It just stays right there at the local post office, and they process the delivery."

Out-of-county, or out-of-state mailings, go to a regional center where the problems exist, he said.

"I've been hearing that from a number of papers," Fisher said.

Galer said that COVID is only part of the real problem. Before the pandemic, he said, the U.S. Postal Service had 650,000 employees. After the virus began to affect numbers, the postal service brought in people to help.

"But today, right now, they still have 650,000 employees, which means there's a huge churn as far as keeping people," Galer said.

Any tracking system for newspaper delivery is "almost useless anymore," Galer said.

Galer's family as a corporation owns The Hillsboro Journal Inc. and the Journal Printing Co. The flagship paper is the Journal News in Hillsboro, a twice-weekly of about 4,800 circulation. It also owns the Raymond News, the Staunton Star-Times, the Bunker Hill Gazette-News, the Southwestern Journal News

in Brighton, the Mount Olive Herald and the Madison County Chronicle located in Worden. Also published are three shoppers, the Macoupin County Journal, The Advertiser, and the M&M Journal.

The shoppers are all mailed out under a "marketing mail" classification, formerly known as Class 3 mailing. The newspapers are sent out under a "periodical" classification, a former classification known as Class 2.

Both classifications have some immediacy about them, primarily because of the advertising depended upon by retailers. The shoppers need to be in hand as early in the week as possible.

"Those stores price weekly and they've got to have that stuff going out at the right time," Galer said. "They're dependent on us getting those into people's homes."

Since his company delivers the printed shoppers directly to the local post office, he has no problems with their delivery. But it's a huge cost for his company, given he has three drivers and two large counties to cover.

The same situation was described by everyone interviewed for this story.

The postal service "has always taken a beating" Galer said, and right now Postmaster General DeJoy is eyeballing changes to put the service in better stead to compete for revenue against other mailing services.

On March 23, DeJoy unveiled a 10-year plan for the USPS that would further slow first-class mail delivery, reduce post office hours, and raise postage prices.

"Basically, they're saying we're going to give you as bad or worse service than you've got now and charge you a whole lot more for it," Galer said.

He's heard of problems outside of his own industry, including banks and utility companies experiencing slow delivery on statements.

Overall, COVID only explains a part of the situation, said Galer, who is 69 and calls himself a "dinosaur" in the newspaper business.

"I think we just need a reliable mail service in this country," he said.

In 2020, DeJoy, who was hand-picked by President Trump, made headlines for what some called his efforts to sabotage the Postal Service. He imposed restrictions on postal workers, removed mailboxes and acted in the face of criticism that those decisions were aimed at undermining the vote-by-mail process in last year's elections. Many of the directives were reversed in court.

President Joe Biden has nominated three people to fill vacancies on the Postal Service Board of Governors. At presstime, that process was underway in the Senate. Critics want the board to replace the postmaster general.

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