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Complaints on mail delivery at Dickinson prompt investigation; newspapers, other mail found in dumpsters | The Dickinson Press

Written By: James B. Miller, Jr. | Dec 19th 2019 - 3pm.

7-8 minutes

The Postal Service says it is investigating irregularities in mail delivery service in Dickinson, including complaints that Dickinson Press newspapers and Advertisers were thrown in dumpsters behind the post office, an action that could be a federal crime.

For weeks, residents of Dickinson have voiced their concerns about the lack of mail delivery on social media, in telephone calls and letters to The Press. Recently, Press subscribers called with complaints after going without the delivery of their newspaper or Advertisers for multiple consecutive days.

On Dec. 6, The Press spoke with Dana Smith, newly appointed postmaster of the Dickinson post office, who revealed the investigation, which he said was larger than just the newspaper issues.

"We are pretty far along in the investigation, and we are implementing something a little different here as a result. As a new postmaster, you want to believe that everybody is doing exactly what they are supposed to be doing ... people call and say we didn't get them their newspaper, and with the issues going on, they might be right."

Postal Service workers previously told The Press they were legally allowed to discard marketing mail, or what some call "junk mail," if it is undeliverable.

That assertion prompted staff from The Press to check garbage bins behind the Dickinson post office, where thousands of Advertisers and hundreds of newspapers — still bundled, unopened — were found. Among the newspapers and Advertisers were other addressed envelopes and general mail.

Stark County State's Attorney Tom Henning, while not commenting on the specific case, said he believed that throwing away newspapers would be considered, in legal terms, destroying them.

According to 18 U.S. Code § 1703, subsection (b):

"(w)hoever, being a Postal Service officer or employee, improperly detains, delays, or destroys any newspaper...not directed to him, shall be fined under this title or imprisoned not more than one year, or both" — marking the Dickinson post office's action as a potential violation of the law.

Smith said he plans to do everything he can to rectify internal concerns that may be causing much of the mail issues.

"This was brought to my attention two days ago, and I called my boss, and he came out here and we looked in the dumpster and we pulled out every paper in the dumpster and took a picture of them," Smith said. "I had heard that someone from The Press had said that we were throwing papers away and I didn't believe it. We went out and did spot checks on our routes and we found out some things that have surprised me."

The Press tried to contact Smith again on Wednesday, Dec. 18, but messages were not returned.

In a statement, Bill Marcil Jr., president of Forum Communications Co., which owns The Dickinson Press, said the allegations were serious.

"Forum Communications takes this alleged theft very seriously," Marcil said. "This strikes us at our core of how we survive. If we are not allowed to deliver our news and advertising, our voice and the voices of many others are being suppressed."

"This is a classic example of why the news media's voice cannot be silenced," Marcil added. "If not for The Dickinson Press to report on this, who will? Facebook?"

Front desk personnel said that several routes at the Dickinson post office currently have no carrier, and regular mail and newspapers addressed to subscribers have gone undelivered as a result.

Residents have shared their frustrations with the increasingly sporadic deliveries of mail, including The Dickinson Press, which began paying the Postal Service to deliver all of its newspapers earlier this year.

"I know that the Post Office is having a problem getting the mail to people in Dickinson. I get that. We didn't get our mail yesterday, sometimes we get it quite late, and I understand that it's a manpower issue and try to understand because it's the Christmas season," Karin Reisenauer, a resident of Dickinson, said in a Facebook post. "We've gotten The Press for many years. My husband likes to read it in the morning and we've adjusted to reading it when it gets here, but now it's not even coming at all. The Press is a 'daily' paper and we like to read it daily. Frustrating."

A social media thread started Dec. 13, read, "No mail delivery in two days." Within hours, it, along with many other threads like it, received countless comments pointing to a systemic service issue.

"I usually only get mail once a week," Brittany Millan commented. "If I'm lucky, I'll get it twice a week."

Others were more tongue-in-cheek about their dismay with the USPS.

"We finally got mail today," Katie Novotny replied.

The Dickinson Police Department stated that it had not received any sustained complaints concerning mail service issues or theft, but would report any complaints of such to a higher federal agency.

"We would be interested if there were packages with money that were missing," said Joe Cianni, Dickinson Police Department.

Mail service concerns in western North Dakota date back to the start of the most recent oil boom, and reached its heights in 2014. Then Postal Service spokesperson John Friess said that the agency was aware of the challenges facing some offices in energy-impacted areas of western North Dakota, and that measures were being taken to resolve the issues.

Regarding the current situation, the Postal Service has offered to provide The Dickinson Press with credit for the newspapers that were discarded, but have yet to do so.

Smith declined to comment on the specific allegations raised by complainants, or address specifics of any individual incident as a result of the ongoing internal investigation. He did state that he did not agree with previous assertions made to The Press by Postal Service employees that newspapers are "junk mail."

"I believe that newspapers are important and absolutely don't concur with the idea that they are junk mail," he said. "I want them delivered...The Press is a huge staple for this community. People love it, people wait for it, and we need to deliver it."