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# National Association of Letter Carriers

**House Committee on Homeland Security's Subcommittee on  
Emergency Preparedness, Response, and Communications  
"Taking Measure of Countermeasures (Part 3): Protecting the  
Protectors"**

**April 17, 2012**

**Testimony of Manuel L. Peralta Jr.  
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Carriers**

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Good morning, Chairman Bilirakis, Ranking Member Richardson, and other members of this very important subcommittee. My name is Manuel L. Peralta Jr., and I am the Director of Safety and Health at the National Association of Letter Carriers.

It's an honor to have the opportunity to provide you with some information about how letter carriers are bolstering our national security by participating – on a volunteer basis – in a program designed to provide medicines to Americans in the event of a biological attack.

Our participation in today's hearing is timely, because just last week we conducted a table-top exercise for the Cities' Readiness Initiative in Louisville, Kentucky.

I will be as brief as I can, so that panel has the appropriate time needed to ask questions – and also because there is mail to deliver today. Six days a week, the letter carriers of the U.S. Postal Service deliver mail to more than 150 million homes and businesses throughout this country, providing the world's best and most affordable delivery service – and today is no exception.

First, let me provide an historical overview of our involvement with this program. In December 2003, just two years after the worst terrorist attack in

American history, President George W. Bush asked the U.S. Postal Service to consider delivering antibiotics to residents of large metropolitan areas during catastrophic incidents – specifically the outdoor release of a biological agent.

President Bush and his homeland security advisers knew that no entity besides the Postal Service had an existing network in place that would be capable of carrying out such a mission. He knew further that letter carriers, who among other things are regularly named by the American people as the most-trusted federal employees, were ideally suited for such a critical and complex task.

On Feb. 18, 2004, the Secretary of Health and Human Services, the Secretary of Homeland Security and the Postmaster General, signed a memorandum of agreement to establish policies and procedures for U.S. Postal Service distribution of oral antibiotics in response to a biological terrorism incident.

The result is the Cities' Readiness Initiative – a federal program led by HHS and designed to help major U.S. cities increase their capacity to respond to a large-scale public health emergency and avert mass casualties by dispensing oral antibiotics to the population within 48 hours.

President Obama further confirmed the value – and the bipartisan nature – of this initiative, through his Executive Order of Dec. 30, 2009, which directed the establishment of a federal capacity through the U.S. Postal Service for the timely residential delivery of medical countermeasures following a biological attack. This Executive Order enacts recommendations made by the Commission on the Prevention of Weapons of Mass Destruction Proliferation and Terrorism, an outgrowth of the September 11<sup>th</sup> Commission.

Both presidents, responsible for protecting the American people, knew no other agency is capable of doing this – because no one else goes to every address in America, six days a week. Further, no one knows the neighborhoods like the letter carriers.

To date, seven cities in six metropolitan areas have become involved in this effort – Seattle, Minneapolis, Louisville, Philadelphia, Boston and San Marcos and Vista both within the county of San Diego. They are in varying stages of preparation. Each program involves a great deal of planning and the participation of a variety of state, local and federal agencies – but one constant is the role of the letter carriers, who are essentially where the rubber hits the road.

We are glad to volunteer for this mission, and to accept the somber responsibility that comes with it. We look upon this not as a chore, but as another form of service. The nation's letter carriers, whom I am privileged to serve as an elected officer of the National Association of Letter Carriers, take seriously our role, embedded in the Constitution, of uniting the country by providing universal mail service to every corner of this country, binding this vast land together and unifying individual communities. All this, without using a dime of taxpayer money.

And though it is not a term and condition of our employment, we take equal pride in serving our communities in other ways as well, whether conducting the nation's largest single-day food drive, watching out for the elderly on our routes – or occasionally finding ourselves in the position of rescuing someone who has fallen or taken ill, locating a missing child, putting out a fire or even stopping a crime.

In that spirit, we are particularly gratified to be able to serve our country in the program I am discussing today. It is a plan to which we are committed and for which we are ready. Why is that? Because service and protection come naturally to letter carriers, one quarter of who are military veterans and are glad to volunteer for their country once again – and all of whom have an affinity for the neighborhoods they serve, their customers and the families they watch grow over the years.

I mentioned that the timing of today's hearing is fortuitous, because of the exercise held just last Wednesday, which made Louisville the second city, after Minneapolis, to be formally designated as a pilot city in the Cities' Readiness Initiative. This followed the March 21<sup>st</sup> signing ceremony at Louisville City Hall with top officials. The president of NALC Branch 14 in Louisville, Allen Harris, took part in the seven-hour exercise, which involved a contaminated truck containing a biological agent. He did so along with federal, state and local officials from the FBI, county sheriff's departments, city and suburban health departments, postal inspectors, police departments, Health and Human Services and other agencies.

Allen reports, with much pride, two things I will share with you. One is that a number of these officials went out of their way to praise the dedication and energy with which the letter carriers are engaged in this effort. The second is that 60 percent of the letter carriers in the Louisville branch of the National Association of Letter Carriers signed up – 323 men and women out of 573 – to undergo the training, and deliver the medicines if and when needed. That is in part due to the large number of military veterans in the branch, according to Allen, himself an Air Force veteran.

As Brother Harris put it, "They already know what it is to serve their country." More broadly, he says, the extraordinary level of participation is attributable to the sense of commitment all his letter carriers have to the neighborhoods they serve.

“It just makes you feel very proud,” Allen said, “because you’re doing something that’s going to help the community. I’ve been on my route 28 years. I’ve seen kids born, go to college, come back home to start their families. It’s almost like you’re a part of their family.”

Already, Branch 14’s union hall has been used some 10 times by Louisville authorities for training and meetings, because it can accommodate up to 220 people. Under the Louisville plan, letter carriers would deliver medicines to 750,000 people in 225,000 households in the city and suburbs in the event of a biological incident. Letter carriers would load 670 cases of medication into each of their two-ton vehicles, from a depository to which the federal government would fly the medicines. There are 48 bottles of medicine per case. Every home will receive two bottles of medication containing 20 pills apiece, along with a flyer. That has two advantages – it makes distribution simpler and faster, and it also staggers the times residents would return to get more medicines.

I might add that this type of planning is nothing new to the Postal Service or to letter carriers – indeed, it is one of the factors that led a recent British study from Oxford to name the U.S. Postal Service the most efficient in the world. In fact, the Cities’ Readiness Initiative is one more example of the value of the unique universal network that is – and must remain – the hallmark of the United States Postal Service.

In closing, let me say once again that we are fully aware of the awesome nature of the responsibility we bear as the foot soldiers for this critical homeland security program, whether in Louisville or Boston, San Diego or Minneapolis or elsewhere. It is a responsibility we readily and fully accept. We appreciate the confidence placed in us by presidents and homeland security officials from both parties – and we are continually training and preparing to justify that confidence.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today, I would be happy to answer any questions you may have.