

September 27, 1999

WILLIAM H. MCCOMB
VICE PRESIDENT, MIDWEST AREA OPERATIONS

SUBJECT: Allegation of a Hostile Working Environment at
a Midwest Area Post Office
(Report Number LM-LA-99-002)

This is our advisory report on an allegation that a hostile working environment existed at the Minneapolis, Minnesota Post Office in the Midwest Area. The report also discusses our review of the Minneapolis management's compliance with United States Postal Service (USPS) policies and procedures for investigating and resolving the allegation.

A Minneapolis Post Office employee (complainant) submitted a complaint to the Office of Inspector General (OIG) Hotline, requesting that we review the harassment and intimidation of employees by another employee working at the Post Office (Project Number 99EF074LM000). Our objectives were to determine whether: (1) a hostile environment existed, and (2) management responded in accordance with established policies and procedures.

Results in Brief

We determined there was a perception that a hostile working environment existed. The complainant told us that another employee was harassing and intimidating him and other employees by wearing a tattoo on his elbow. The complainant told us that the tattoo signified that the wearer had committed an act of violence.

The complainant reported the issue to the Lead Plant Manager who conducted an investigation. However, the complainant told us that he may have over-reacted when he made a complaint to the OIG Hotline, and that he was satisfied with the way his supervisor and the Lead Plant Manager have handled his complaint.

We also determined that Minneapolis management followed the USPS published zero tolerance policy regarding violence and inappropriate behavior in the workplace. The complainant reported the incident to the Lead Plant Manager, and an investigation was conducted. The Lead Plant Manager took the proper actions, including a recommendation that the complainant seek counseling through the Employee Assistance Program.

We have no suggestions and plan no further work on this allegation. We discussed the contents of this report with management and they had no comments.

**Objective, Scope, and
Methodology**

In a hotline complaint to the OIG, dated July 23, 1999, the complainant reported the existence of a hostile working environment at the Minneapolis, Minnesota Post Office. The complainant told us that another employee was harassing and intimidating black employees by wearing a tattoo that they (the black employees) found offensive. The employee said he was “afraid of what he himself might do” in reaction to the harassment.

The OIG normally does not review individual labor-management disputes, particularly when other formal avenues of resolution exist, including contractual grievance-arbitration procedures and the Equal Employment Opportunity process. However, we will undertake such reviews when the allegations pertain to violence in the workplace.

Our objectives were to determine whether: (1) a hostile environment existed, and (2) management responded in accordance with established policies and procedures.

We interviewed the complainant and the Lead Plant Manager. We also reviewed the hotline complaint, the USPS Joint Statement on Violence and Behavior in the Workplace, the Threat Assessment Team Guide (Publication 108), and the Employee and Labor Relations Manual, Section 870, Employee Assistance Program.

This review was conducted from August through September 1999 in accordance with the President’s Council on Integrity and Efficiency, Quality Standards for Inspections.

Observations

We determined there was a perception that a hostile working environment existed. We also determined that Minneapolis management followed the USPS zero tolerance policy regarding violence and inappropriate behavior in the workplace.

**Allegation of a
Hostile Working
Environment**

In a July 1999 hotline complaint to the OIG, the complainant alleged that another employee was harassing and intimidating him and other black employees, thereby creating a hostile working environment. Specifically, the complainant stated that the employee had a spider tattoo on his elbow. The complainant told us that the spider “indicates” that the wearer of the tattoo has committed an act of violence against a black person.

In the hotline complaint, the complainant said he reported the issue to the Lead Plant Manager, who was investigating the matter. However, the complainant did not believe that he was taken seriously. The complainant said that he (the complainant) was “afraid of what he himself might do” in reaction to the employee wearing the tattoo. He said that his fear is based on a personal experience that happened to one of his family members.

The complainant later told us that he may have “over-reacted” when he made the hotline complaint. He said that he has known the employee wearing the tattoo for 12 years and during that time the employee had never given him reason to believe that he might be associated with a racist group. The complainant said that he received his information about the meaning of the tattoo from a TV documentary. He believes that his over-reaction may have been based on his viewing of the TV documentary coupled with some personal experiences.

**USPS Response to
Alleged Physical
Threat**

The Joint Statement on Violence and Behavior in the Workplace states that the Postal Service will not tolerate violence or any threats of violence by anyone at any level of the Postal Service. In addition, the USPS Threat Assessment Team Guide (Publication 108), requires that when an incident occurs, notification be made to the Human Resources Manager, the Inspection Service, Senior Labor Relations Specialist, Employee and Workplace Intervention Analyst, Medical Director, District Manager, or Lead Plant Manager. The Guide further provides that the Human

Resources Manager or designee will determine whether a meeting needs to be called or whether the situation may be addressed through other Threat Assessment Team members or ad hoc resources.

In this case, the complainant reported the incident directly to the Lead Plant Manager. The Lead Plant Manager conducted an investigation and concluded that the situation was resolved and that all parties involved had come to an understanding. The complainant confirmed that the matter had been settled to his satisfaction, and that he had no other concerns.

The Lead Plant Manager told us that based on this situation and other personal issues concerning the complainant, he was going to recommend that the complainant speak with an Employee Assistance Program¹ counselor.

We have no suggestions and plan no further work on this allegation.

**Management's
Comments**

We discussed the contents of this report with management. They had no comments.

We appreciated the cooperation and courtesies provided by your staff during the review. If you have any questions, please contact me at (703) 248-2300.

Billy Sauls
Assistant Inspector General
for Employee

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¹ The Employee Assistance Program is a formal, non-disciplinary program designed to assist employees in dealing with personal problems that may adversely affect an employee's job performance and personal life. Assistance is provided through consultation, evaluation, counseling, and/or referral to community resources and treatment facilities.

**Major Contributors to [REDACTED]
This Report**