



June 17, 2004

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CHIEF OPERATING OFFICER AND
EXECUTIVE VICE PRESIDENT

SUBJECT: Fiscal Year 2003 District Consolidations in the Eastern, Northeast, and Pacific Areas (Report Number ST-OT-04-001)

This letter presents the results of our review of the fiscal year (FY) 2003 district consolidations in the Eastern, Northeast, and Pacific Areas that you requested in November 2003 (Project Number 04BR004OE000). In that request, you asked the Office of Inspector General to determine what the Postal Service did that worked well and if improvements could be made in future consolidations.

We concluded that overall the district consolidations process worked well for the Postal Service. In particular, the Postal Service consolidated administrative functions without affecting operations or involuntarily separating employees, while still achieving the district consolidation goals. In addition, no grievances were filed by executive and administrative schedule (EAS) employees, and only seven Equal Employment Opportunity (EEO) complaints and two Merit Systems Protection Board complaints were filed regarding the consolidation. All the EEO complaints and one Merit Systems Protection Board complaint are pending. The other Merit Systems Protection Board complaint was settled in favor of the Postal Service.

We conducted over 100 interviews with officials at Postal Service Headquarters in Washington D.C., area officials in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania; Windsor, Connecticut; and San Diego and San Francisco, California; and affected personnel in district offices including Harrisburg and Philadelphia, Pennsylvania; Springfield, Massachusetts; Cleveland, Ohio; and Long Beach, Los Angeles, San Jose, and Santa Ana, California. We interviewed area vice presidents, Postal Service management in each location, and selected employees affected by the consolidations.

At the conclusion of our visit to each Postal Service area, we summarized the information we learned about what worked well and what improvements could be made if future consolidations occur. These detailed summaries are in the attached appendices:

- Eastern Area – Appendix A
- Northeast Area – Appendix B
- Pacific Area – Appendix C

In addition, we provided the Vice President, Employee Resource Management, with an interim briefing concerning the Eastern Area consolidation, and the Manager, Selection Evaluation and Recognition, with a final briefing after completing our visits to the Northeast and Pacific Areas.

Based on our interviews with management and affected employees, we categorized the results into the following four categories:

- Competition
- Communication
- Planning
- Execution

The most important factor in the success of the consolidations was in the area of competition. Positions vacant prior to the consolidation were held open for affected employees, which allowed management to achieve its goal of providing a position for every employee who wanted to continue working. Of the 512 employees affected, 118 received promotions, 221 were moved laterally, 123 accepted demotions, 44 retired, and only 6 individuals voluntarily separated. Overall, the planning, communication, and execution of the consolidations were successful as well. Our interviews showed that in the areas of competition, communication, planning, and execution improvements could be made for future consolidations.

We have summarized what we learned in our interviews and discussions with Postal Service employees concerning what worked well and what improvements management could consider if future consolidations occur. In the categories of competition, communication, planning, and execution, the first bullet summarizes what worked well, and the second bullet is a summary of improvements.

Competition

- By holding job positions open, the Postal Service ensured jobs were available for all affected employees. This was a goal of Postal Service management and was instrumental in the success of the consolidation. In addition, holding on-site as well as phone interviews was more convenient for affected employees. Training provided in completing Postal Service (PS) Form 991, Application for Promotion or Assignment, helped affected employees in being competitive for open positions. Finally, allowing employees demoted to a lower pay grade to retain their scheduled merit increases for the first year was a morale booster for those employees.

- Interviewees stated that more desirable positions became available in subsequent rounds of bidding after they had been placed. They believed all open job positions should have been available in the first round. This would allow employees to be aware of all available positions and apply for those that are most desirable. In addition, interviewees suggested that headquarters consider matching affected employees with vacancies in the same or similar positions and placing employees in those positions.

Communication

- Town hall meetings where all affected employees were able to hear the same message at the same time were well received. In addition, information binders gave all affected employees the same information. Interviewees said that websites established to answer questions about the consolidation were valuable. In addition, transition managers who assisted in consolidation matters at each site, and district level management, provided timely responses to questions from employees (usually 48 hours or less).
- Communication could be improved by better explaining veterans' preference at the announcement of the consolidation. There were veterans who believed they would have a preference over other affected employees during the consolidation. However, the Postal Service had determined the competitive area no longer existed, and therefore, no veterans' preference existed. In addition, interviewees told us that Postal Service management should explain the reason for selecting the districts being consolidated. Also, including affected craft employees in initial town hall meetings would convey a more consistent message to affected employees. We were told the average answer to questions submitted to headquarters took approximately two weeks to receive and a more timely response was needed.

Planning

- Employees had a positive response to the consistent information provided to them. The response was positive because headquarters provided information packages to the area offices that included newsbreaks announcing the consolidation, service talks with talking points for town hall meetings, and guidelines on how to conduct the consolidations.
- Employees said that for future consolidations, a decision on Voluntary Early Retirement Authority (VERA) should be made before the consolidation announcement. On July 11, 2003, management announced the consolidation, and VERA was not available to affected employees until late August 2003. Employees considered this to be too late because by the time VERA was approved, employees who had accepted positions were no longer eligible for VERA. The delayed decision was caused, in part, because the paperwork was

not submitted to the Office of Personnel Management (OPM) for approval early enough in the process, and because OPM took longer than expected to approve the VERA. In addition, employees said administrative consolidations should, if possible, be planned to avoid the traditional open seasons so that additional work is not created during the peak season for administrative functions.

Execution

- Management built trust with employees with the use of saved salary. Employees who accepted downgrades were guaranteed their salary would remain stable for two years. In addition, since employees were applying for multiple positions, it was helpful to allow them to rank their preference of positions. This allowed management to work with impacted employees to obtain their most desirable position. Providing annuity statements to retirement eligible employees was well received by those employees.
- Employees suggested additional time is needed to complete and rank applications and interview candidates so that everyone involved in the consolidation process can make the best decisions. In the Eastern Area, employees told us they were overwhelmed with the increased volume of work and it had become hard to manage because there were difficulties in combining multiple district personnel systems with an increased volume of work using the same staff level.

Overall, the Postal Service's approach to district consolidations contributed to its success. As with any process, there are areas that can be improved for any future consolidations. The attached appendices give detailed explanations of the Postal Service's success with the district consolidations and possibilities for more success in the future.

We appreciate the cooperation and courtesies provided by your staff and the opportunity to assist you in improving Postal Service operations. Our office would welcome an opportunity to serve you again as an independent third party reviewer. If you have any questions or need additional information, please contact Michael Thompson, Director, Strategy and Performance, at (703) 248-2389 or me at (703) 248-2300.

/s/ Ronald Merryman

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APPENDIX A. EASTERN AREA

We conducted work at the Eastern Area office in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, and district offices in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania; Philadelphia, Pennsylvania; and Cleveland, Ohio. We conducted 41 interviews which included the Area Vice President, various managers, and affected employees. The following is a summary of the information we received in the Eastern Area.

What Worked Well:

Competition

- **Positions on Hold**
By holding positions open, the Postal Service ensured that jobs were available for all affected employees. This was instrumental in the consolidation's success.
- **Competing for Positions With Other Affected Employees**
Only employees affected by the consolidation were able to compete for positions during the first round of postings. This limited the competition to affected employees and allowed them to be placed in open positions.
- **On-Site Interviews**
Interviews for vacant positions were conducted at the location of the affected employees. This saved the Postal Service time and money and was more convenient for employees. On-site interviews also allowed more employees to compete for open vacancies.
- **Training**
Affected employees received training assignments so they could gain experience and knowledge in other Postal Service positions. This allowed them to be minimally qualified for open positions that they would not have qualified for otherwise.
- **Merit Increases**
Headquarters decided that employees demoted to a lower pay grade would receive their annual merit raise at their previous pay grade for the first year. Most employees affected held their prior positions for the majority of the year, and this was a morale booster for those employees.

Communication

- **Town Hall Meetings**
Management held town hall meetings to ensure all affected employees heard the same message at the same time.

- **Information Binders for Affected Employees**
All affected employees received information binders with answers to common questions about the consolidation, how to secure another position and options for separating from the Postal Service. This ensured that employees received the same information at the same time.
- **Transitional Manager**
A transitional manager was identified to serve as a focal point at each site. This manager handled employees' questions and concerns about the consolidations and provided consistent information.
- **Statistics on Positions**
Management quickly provided affected employees the status of promotions, demotions, and lateral reassignments. It was helpful for employees to see that promotions and lateral assignments took place and not only demotions.
- **Timely Responses by Transition Manager**
Management and employees agreed that 90 percent or more of all employee questions about the consolidation were answered by email within 48 hours of submission.

Planning

- In interviews, we did not receive any information in this area.

Execution

- In interviews, we did not receive any information in this area.

What Needs Improvement:

Competition

- **Positions Not Released During First Round**
We were told in interviews that several management, associate supervisor, or higher-level positions were held open but were not available to affected employees in the first round of bidding. Management explained that these positions were initially held open because there were excess candidates in the national supervisory program. However, after a review, management found no one from the national program was located in the affected districts, so the positions were released for the second round of announcements for affected employees. This decision to hold the jobs open during the first round was made at headquarters and area levels. Any employee who accepted a job during the

first round was no longer eligible to apply for new jobs in subsequent rounds, although higher-level positions were open.

- Holding Vacant Positions
According to employees, several higher-level postmaster jobs in the affected areas were filled two weeks before the consolidation was announced. Several affected employees stated they would have applied if they had known about the pending consolidation. Affected employees could not understand why these jobs were not held open, as the others had been.

Communication

- Timely Answers Needed from Headquarters
Employees stated that responses took an average of one to two weeks, which they felt was too long given the condensed timeframes. This occurred because complex questions could not be answered at the area level and were referred to headquarters, extending the total response time.
- Clear Guidance Needed for Veterans
Veterans believed they would have a preference over other affected employees during the consolidation. However, the Postal Service determined the competitive area no longer existed and therefore no veteran's preference existed. Communication could be improved by better explaining veteran's preference at the announcement of the consolidation.
- Craft Employees Not Informed
The employees we interviewed stated that area management officially notified non-bargaining unit (EAS) employees of the consolidation and what it meant. Interviewees said it would have been helpful if management had met with bargaining unit (craft) employees who worked at the district office to explain the impact of the consolidation.

Planning

- Voluntary Early Retirement Authority (VERA) Decision Needed Earlier
The announcement to consolidate was made on July 11, 2003, and the affected employees indicated they had to determine their career and future immediately. However, the VERA was not available to affected employees until late August 2003. Employees considered this to be too late in the process. This is significant because by the time VERA was approved, employees who had accepted positions were no longer eligible for VERA. The delayed decision was caused in part because the paperwork was not submitted to the Office of Personnel Management (OPM) for approval early enough in the process and also because OPM took longer than management expected to approve the VERA.

- **Administrative Support Areas Need to be Involved Early**
In interviews, district personnel said administrative personnel need to be included in planning to determine issues and needs for future consolidations to help with transitioning of administrative functions. The consolidations had an affect on which employees would be responsible for administrative functions, including finance numbers, local post offices, vehicle maintenance facilities, contracts, and personnel actions.
- **Number of Authorized Positions and Location**
Area management stated headquarters gave them only three hours to determine the final numbers of authorized personnel for the districts, which included cutting several positions at headquarters' request, and where to employ personnel. Area management did not consider this sufficient time to consult the affected districts and make the appropriate decisions.
- **Computer and Systems Access**
On the effective date of the consolidation, field employees stated they could not access the district's former computer systems such as Operations and Human Resources data. Although employees were reassigned to new districts, neither new nor old district personnel could access the computer systems of the former district. This occurred because all access ended on the closure date of the old district, preventing completion of personnel actions. Interviewees stated that better planning of infrastructure issues, including transitioning from old to new systems, would be helpful.
- **Moving Contracts**
Employees said there was a delay in moving furniture, fixtures, and computer equipment from the former district office to employees' new locations. They said this occurred because the Memphis operation needed four weeks to process the contract request and management did not submit the request in advance. Moving contracts should be set up at the beginning of the consolidation.
- **Transition Manager's Responsibilities**
Employees said they were unsure about the Transition Manager's responsibilities, and communicating this manager's duties to all levels would be helpful. This would inform all employees about responsibilities and expectations of the newly created position of Transition Manager.
- **Avoiding Traditional Open Seasons**
District personnel suggested future consolidations should be planned to avoid traditional open seasons such as the Thrift Savings Plan, Flexible Spending Accounts, health care coverage, and retirements that typically take place from October through December. This would reduce the workload for Human Resources personnel during consolidations.

Execution

- **More Time Needed for Ranking and Interviewing Candidates**
Interviewees stated that additional time is needed to rank the applications and interview candidates so that all involved in the consolidation process will have sufficient time to make the best decisions.
- **Generic Job Announcements**
According to affected employees, there was significant confusion about job announcements for human resource specialist positions. These announcements were generic, and the affected employees did not know whether a specific job was for the safety division or personnel division. This was significant because employees knew there were planned cutbacks in the personnel division and did not want to apply for this area. Employees felt specific announcements would have prevented this confusion.
- **Interview Questions Should Be Job-Related**
Employees stated that most job interviews consisted of one question, "Tell me about yourself." Affected employees believed that questions should apply to the open position and the duties or knowledge, skills, and abilities (KSAs) for the position.
- **Combining Two Personnel Systems**
Employees told us they were overwhelmed with the increased volume of work, which was hard to manage because they had to combine multiple district personnel systems. This created an increased amount of work, although the number of staff did not increase.

APPENDIX B. NORTHEAST AREA

We conducted work at the Northeast Area office in Windsor, Connecticut, and the district office in Springfield, Massachusetts. We conducted 39 interviews which included the Area Vice President, various managers, and affected employees. The following is a summary of the information we received in the Northeast Area.

What Worked Well:

Competition

- **Positions on Hold**
By holding positions open, the Postal Service ensured that jobs were available for all affected employees. This was considered instrumental to the success of the consolidation. There were 94 employees that were affected, and over 130 jobs were available.
- **Competing With Other Affected Employees for Positions**
Only employees affected by the consolidation were able to compete for positions during the first round of postings. This limited the competition to affected employees and allowed them to bid and be selected for open positions.

Communication

- **Town Hall Meetings**
Management held town hall meetings so all affected employees heard the same message at the same time and information was consistent. The Area Vice President visited Springfield to announce the consolidation to district employees.
- **Information Folder for Affected Employees**
To keep affected employees informed, they received folders containing information on the timeline for consolidation in the Northeast Area, Springfield District; information on the employee website, placement guidelines, Reduction in Force guidelines, job postings; and a disk containing PS Form 991.
- **Website**
Management created a website to keep employees informed of positions that were available, awarded, and to provide general information.
- **Transitional Manager**
A transitional manager served as a focal point at each site. This manager handled employees' questions and concerns about the consolidations, and provided consistent information and a uniform message.

- **Implementation Team**
The implementation team was helpful and available to answer questions and reviewed and made suggestions to affected employees about completing PS Form 991.

Planning

- **Voluntary Early Retirement Authority (VERA)**
Management was confident that all employees who wanted jobs would be placed; therefore, they did not request VERA. Management told us there were more open positions than affected employees; therefore, VERA was not needed.

Execution

- **Interviews**
To assist employees who were out of the office during the interview period, management allowed them to conduct interviews by telephone.
- **Save Salary**
Interviewees told us that employees who were demoted were able to retain their salaries for two years. These employees could also search for higher-level positions during this two-year period.
- **Training**
To help employees become more competitive for open job positions, management provided training on how to complete PS Form 991.
- **Preference List**
Employees applying for multiple positions found it helpful to rank their preference of positions. This allowed management to work with affected employees to obtain their most desired positions. Employees were also allowed to bid for jobs in other districts.

What Needs Improvement:

Competition

- **Limited Competition**
Affected employees stated they should be given the opportunity to obtain the best position possible and not be required to take the first job offered. Employees who accepted a job during the first round were no longer eligible to apply for new jobs in subsequent rounds, although higher-level positions were available than the positions they had been awarded.

Communication

- [REDACTED] a “Heads Up”
[REDACTED] stated that [REDACTED] deliberately leaked the pending consolidation to give [REDACTED] people a “heads up,” giving them additional time to secure new positions. However, headquarters wanted all employees affected by the consolidations to receive a uniform message from management at the same time.
- Media Reported Consolidation
Postal Service management told us the media reported the consolidation in the newspapers before employees were officially informed.
- Craft Employees Not Informed
The employees we interviewed stated that area management officially notified non-bargaining unit (EAS) employees of the consolidation and what it meant. Interviewees said it would have been helpful if management had also met with bargaining unit (craft) employees who worked at the district office to explain the consolidations.
- Clearer Guidance Needed
Veterans believed they would have a preference over other affected employees during the consolidation. However, the Postal Service determined the competitive area no longer existed, and therefore no veteran’s preference existed. Communication could have been improved by better explaining veteran’s preference when the consolidation was announced.
- Selection of Springfield for Consolidation
Employees stated it was not clear why Springfield was selected for consolidation or what was accomplished by the consolidation. According to employees, Springfield had a history of being a high-performing district.
- Merit Pay
Affected employees stated there was confusion as to how merit pay should be calculated and whether it should have been based on the current or previous grade level.
- Website
According to employees, the website was not regularly updated after most affected employees were placed. Employees who were not yet placed felt they did not receive current information on the website.

Planning

- Computer and Systems Access
On the date of the consolidation, field employees stated they could not access the district's former computer systems such as Operations and Human Resource data. Although employees were reassigned to new districts, neither new nor old district personnel could access the computer systems of the former district. This occurred because all access ended on the closure date of the old district, preventing completion of personnel actions. Interviewees stated that better planning of issues, including transitioning from old to new systems, would be helpful.
- Employee Assistance Program
According to employees, the Employee Assistance Program (EAP) should have been involved at the local level instead of only at headquarters. The local EAP office was closed the day the consolidation was announced, since it was staffed by an affected Springfield District employee who was part of a pilot program (a joint union and management endeavor). The EAP counselor was not allowed to formally close cases because the priority was to complete PS Forms 991 and find a new position. In addition, management requested confidential employee records and files without employees' written consent, but the EAP counselor did not release the files. [REDACTED]
[REDACTED] The counselor informed employees with open cases that the Springfield pilot program was ending and they would need to contact a representative of the national EAP program if they needed further assistance.
- Routine Duties
Employees stated they were told to complete their PS Forms 991 and not do any other work. They were also told they would receive help in performing their routine duties. However, they received little or no support in performing their routine duties. They had to complete PS Form 991 in addition to their routine workload.
- Insufficient Time to Complete PS Form 991
Impacted employees stated they were encouraged to apply for as many jobs as possible and were told the best jobs would be filled in the first round of competition. They said two weeks was not sufficient time to complete the numerous applications.
- Electronic PS Form 991
Interviewees stated the Northeast Area received electronic applications in various formats and had difficulty accessing some of them. Affected employees received a new PS Form 991 application template, but had difficulty using the new version. Therefore, some employees used more familiar templates.

Execution

- Telephone Interviews
Some employees stated they did not like having interviews conducted by telephone when they were in leave status or away from the office because this intruded on their personal time.

- Indefinite Save Grade
The Area Vice President stated he would have preferred indefinite save grade as used in the 1992 reorganization. He stated that save grade allowed for a much easier transition for the employees. Save grade would have increased the “high 3” for employees near retirement. Under the current district consolidations, employees save their salary for only two years.

APPENDIX C. PACIFIC AREA

We conducted work at the Pacific Area office in San Francisco, California, and district offices in Oakland, San Jose, Santa Ana, and Los Angeles, California. We conducted 36 interviews which included the Area Vice President, various managers, and affected employees. The following is a summary of the information we received in the Northeast Area.

What Worked Well:

Competition

- **Positions on Hold**
By holding positions open, the Postal Service ensured there were jobs available for all affected employees. This was instrumental to the consolidation's success.
- **Competing for Positions with Other Affected Employees**
Only employees affected by the consolidation were allowed to compete for positions during the first round of postings. This limited the competition to affected employees and allowed them to be placed in open positions. Also, after the first round of competition, employees were allowed to bid for jobs in other districts.

Communication

- **Town Hall Meetings**
Management held town hall meetings to ensure all affected employees heard the same message at the same time and also to provide consistent information. The Area Vice President visited both San Jose and Long Beach to inform district employees of the consolidation.
- **Transitional Manager**
A transitional manager served as a focal point at each site. This manager answered employees' questions and concerns about the consolidations and provided consistent information. The San Jose employees had high praise for their transition coordinator.

Planning

- **Computer/Systems Access**
Area management stated that on the effective date of the consolidation, field employees retained access to the former district computer systems such as Operations and Human Resources data. Before the effective date, Pacific Area

management obtained emergency access to San Jose and Long Beach District computer systems.

- **Consistency**
Area management stated that headquarters and the affected areas were to hold daily teleconferences at the beginning of the consolidation process. Regular teleconferences were held with consolidation team members and Human Resources managers. In addition, area management discussed “what if” scenarios and sent standard operation procedures to the field to provide consistency.

Execution

- **Interviews**
Employees told us interviews were conducted at hotels in San Jose for San Jose District employees and Los Angeles for Long Beach District employees. If employees were out of the office, they could be interviewed by telephone. In addition, a representative from each functional area the employee applied for was present at the interview to ask specific questions, reducing the number of interviews an employee was required to attend.
- **Completing PS Form 991**
Employees said that applicants for jobs at the same or lower level had to submit only pages 1 and 2 of PS Form 991, which saved time. The additional pages addressing KSAs were needed only when applying for higher-level jobs.
- **Saved Salary**
Interviewees told us employees who were demoted were able to retain their salary for two years.
- **Training**
To help employees become more competitive for open positions, training was provided on how to complete PS Form 991.
- **Preference List**
Employees applying for multiple positions found it helpful to rank their preference of positions. This allowed management to work with affected employees to obtain their most desired positions.
- **Annuity Calculations**
Eligible employees received annuity calculations to assist them with retirement planning.

What Needs Improvement:

Competition

- Clearer Guidelines Needed
Employees told us that several management, associate supervisor, or higher-level positions were held open, but were not available to affected employees in the first round of competition. It was explained that these positions were initially held open because there were excess candidates in the national supervisory program. The decision to hold the jobs open during the first round of bidding was made at the headquarters and area levels. Any employee who accepted a job during the first round was no longer eligible to apply for new jobs in subsequent rounds, even if higher-level positions were available than the one awarded.
- Interim Job Postings
Employees stated that too many jobs were posted between the three rounds of competition, instead of posting all openings in the first round. Interviewees stated this gave the appearance that upper management was withholding jobs from affected employees.
- Limited Competition Alternatives
Area management suggested that headquarters study the job posting process in a limited competition environment. This could include matching affected employees with vacancies in the same or similar positions and placing employees in those positions.

Communication

- Craft Employees Were Not Informed
Employees stated that area management officially notified non-bargaining unit (EAS) employees of the consolidation and what it meant. Interviewees indicated that it would have been helpful if management had also met with bargaining unit (craft) employees who worked in the district office to explain the impact of the consolidation.
- 50-Mile Radius
Employees said the headquarters definition of the 50-mile radius rule was confusing. Employees who worked for the San Jose District office and were domiciled in either Fresno, 2.5 hours away, or Bakersfield, 4 hours away, could not apply for job openings at those locations. Employees stated they could apply for jobs only within a 50-mile radius of the San Jose District office during the first round of job postings.

Planning

- VERA Decision Needed Earlier
The consolidation announcement was made on July 11, 2003, and affected employees indicated they had to make immediate decisions about their careers and futures. However, VERA was not available to affected employees until late August 2003. Employees considered this too late in the process. This is significant because by the time VERA was approved, employees who had accepted positions were no longer eligible for VERA. The decision was delayed partly because applications were not submitted to OPM for approval early enough in the process, and because OPM took longer than management expected to approve the VERA.
- Abolished Job
According to interviewees, an affected employee accepted a job in [REDACTED], only to have that job abolished one month later. Since the employee had accepted the job, [REDACTED] was no longer considered affected and could not bid on jobs designated for impacted employees.
- Timing of Consolidation
Area management suggested timing the consolidation process to coincide with January, the month when most employees retire. Interviewees stated that not timing the consolidations to coincide with optimal retirement dates for government employees poses a tax disadvantage and results in fewer employees being willing to retire.

Execution

- Interviews
Employees stated they did not like the fact that some interviews were conducted by telephone. In addition, some employees stated they had to participate in telephone interviews while on leave.
- Completing PS Forms 991
According to employees, they were told to complete PS Forms 991 and not do any other work. They were also told they would receive help with their workload. However, they received little or no support with their regular workload and had to complete PS Form 991 within two weeks, which was not sufficient time.