Organizing to Save Rural Post Offices

A Community Organizing Toolkit

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This toolkit will be updated as we learn more.
Check for an updated version at www.rop.org

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Introduction: Postal Service, the Constitution, and Democracy

When we first got word that the United States Postal Service was trying to cut services, post offices, jobs and processing centers, we were angered and frustrated. The right to postal service is guaranteed by our Constitution – how could it be under threat? What would the loss of the post office mean for the hundreds of small towns across Oregon that rely on their post offices for their communication, livelihood, and health?

Saving post offices and protecting a US Postal Service run by, of and for the people is about our Constitutional rights and, for rural Americans, it is also about having a thriving democracy.

The definition of democracy straight from the Encyclopedia states that democracy is inclusive of all, that the will of the majority is respected along with the rights of the minority, that people are well informed and educated, and that our decisions promote a reasonable standard of living.

Seen through the lens of democracy, post office cuts are an assault on inclusion of all and on a reasonable standard of living.

How can we have inclusion of all if many lack access to basic communication – including voter registration and vote-by-mail – based on where we live? For rural America, lacking broadband internet, online communication is not an option.

As far as a reasonable standard of living, how will rural small businesses and ranchers send and receive products, catalogues or soil samples without a post office for 50 miles or more? How will seniors and others access their medication? Not to mention that full-time postmasters have some of the last few jobs that you can support a family on in rural Oregon.

Through our efforts, we aim to save our post offices and full-time postmaster positions. We don't know if we will succeed, but we know that we can't sit idly by as a cornerstone of small town life and one more piece of our democracy is dismantled without the opportunity to truly weigh in.

This tool kit is designed to equip you and your community to make it very clear to the USPS what we really want: full service post offices with full time Postmaster positions. Read on for more details.

The Details:

Right now rural Oregon is facing the POStPlan, which puts 124 rural Oregon post offices on the chopping block – nearly 1/3 of Oregon's post offices – and 4 of Oregon's mail sorting plants, leaving Medford and Portland as the only two operational sorting plants in the state. The POStPlan promises many options to save the USPS money by offering postmasters early retirement and replacing them with non-career clerks, by closing post offices, by cutting hours back, or even moving post office boxes into a nearby business. None of these options preserve rural postal service.

When a post office doesn't have a postmaster, the USPS then has the right to close the post office. Imagine what will happen if the USPS tries to replace a full-time postmaster position with a clerk paid minimum wage 2-hours per day? What happens when the USPS cannot find someone to fill that position?

Inside you will find the best of what we have learned so far working to save rural post offices and mail processing centers. We know that the USPS will send out a survey to community members with several options for the local post office. The USPS will then send representatives to our towns to hold community meetings this fall. Both the survey and the community meetings do not provide an option or space for our communities to go on record that we want to keep existing hours and full time Postmasters. This toolkit is designed to allow you and your community to do just that. We have gathered the best intelligence we can find: from reports from community meetings, to example questions to ask at community meetings, to a story about Summer Lake's success at organizing and even saving their local post office (so far), to creative and bold strategies to use at community meetings.

As we learn more about what is happening at community meetings, we will be updating the materials and doing our best to share what we learn. Contact ROP at 503-543-8417 or Jessica@rop.org for the most recent information.

What You Can Expect: Timeline of Upcoming Events

If your post office is listed on the POStPlan, the United States Postal Service (USPS) will be in touch soon to collect public input, which is required by law. Below is the order of events you can expect from the USPS:

Letters will be sent to your community informing you of an upcoming community meeting the USPS will be holding for public input.

Accompanying this letter will be a community survey. This survey gives you very few options: post office closure, turning your post office into a "Village Post Office" where your post office boxes will be moved into a local business and your mail will be handled by that business' employees, or you can choose the POStPlan – hour cuts and service reduction. We have heard stories from Postmasters that these surveys are being returned with folks most often choosing "hour cuts and service reduction," but then expressing frustration for no option to keep current post office hours. See page 12 for information about the survey.

There should be a public notice in the post office notifying everyone of the community meeting. This notice must be in the post office 2-weeks before the meeting date. **Note that your community can reschedule this community meeting to a time and place that will work best for you and your neighbors.** Oregonians can call Larry Loumena at 503-294-2500 in USPS District Office to reschedule. You can call the Rural Organizing Project at 503-543-8417 for assistance through this process. Be persistent. **They are required by law to reschedule**.

At the community meeting, USPS representatives will inform you about the proposed changes coming to the USPS by the POStPlan.

According to USPS regulations, if the community does not attend, the USPS can move forward their proposed plan because of a lack of public interest. That means that if the USPS wanted to close your post office and no one came to the meeting, they could go ahead.

The community can advocate for whatever option they see most appropriate. We have seen incredible success in doing the necessary research to tell the USPS representatives how much closure and hour cuts would hurt the community – see the Summer Lake story.

If the USPS moves forward with closure, a 30-day closure notice will be posted in your post office. Your community can appeal the closure within 30-days of its posting through the Postal Regulatory Committee, which will keep your post office open for an additional 60-days, beginning the day the appeal is submitted.

If the USPS moves forward with hour cuts, they can implement hour cuts within 30-days of the public meeting. Because of these hour cuts, most Postmasters will be replaced with Postmaster Relief (PMRs). If the USPS cannot find anyone to fill the PMR position, the USPS can close your post office.

What We Do and Don't Know About Community Meetings

From our experience with previous meetings and what organizers around the state are telling us, we know that:

- ⇒ The USPS sends surveys to communities before the community meeting is held. The USPS asserts that everyone was mailed a survey, but many towns have reported that dozens, and sometimes hundreds, of folks never received the survey.
- ⇒ The USPS has prioritized meetings in communities with vacant Postmaster positions.
- ⇒ As of right now, the USPS has stopped scheduling meetings in Oregon all together, which is different than most states. The USPS says they will begin a new round of meetings in Oregon in January.
- ⇒ The USPS is only scheduling 1 hour to do their presentation and receive community input. After that, they plan to be traveling to the next meeting.
- ⇒ Some communities have tried to reschedule their meetings so working folks can attend. The USPS has refused.
- ⇒ So far in Oregon, the USPS's presentation lasts about 20-minutes and covers the national funding crisis. They discuss the plan from 18 months ago to close 41 rural Oregon post offices. Those closures were taken off the table and the POStPlan was introduced, which they propose reduced hours to match the hours "earned," based on revenue and workload.
- ⇒ We know that these "earned" hours disregard many of the essential services rural post offices provide, including answering phone calls or answering customer questions.
- ⇒ The USPS hasn't customized their presentation for individual communities. The USPS representatives have said that they don't have specific information on individual post offices, but could have the Portland office send it to folks later. Portland has yet to send any information to satisfy these requests.
- ⇒ The USPS provides a fact sheet with statistics on how many surveys were sent (see page 17) and break down how the community responded by the option they chose. Maintaining full hours and Postmaster position is not an option on the survey (see page 12), so the results shared by the USPS representative does not include this.
- ⇒ The USPS representatives are saying that hour reductions will be implemented 30-days after the community meeting.

We don't know:

- ⇒ Why aren't some community meetings being advertised? They have been coordinated by the USPS, but aren't on the USPS website, nor has any notice been issued to the post office to put up for customers to see.
- ⇒ How community input is processed. What happens to the surveys?
- ⇒ What is done with the testimony given at the meetings?
- ⇒ If the decision has already been made and if community input actually has any bearing in this process.

A Model to Build From: Lessons from Summer Lake Organizing

The POStPlan touts that the USPS will hold "community meetings for public input" in every community facing hour cuts. Rural Americans organized around these "community meetings" last fall after the initial closures were announced, **and they won incredible victories for their boldness!**

We are adapting a model for responding to this new assault based on the incredible organizing of Summer Lake, a rural community in Lake County, Oregon, **who successfully saved their post office from closure last fall.**

When they saw the notice for a "community meeting for public input" in the Summer Lake Post Office, they immediately started organizing. The USPS set a date and time that most Summer Lake residents could not attend, so Summer Lake got to work rescheduling their meeting for a time that worked for them. They chose a location that they knew they could fill to capacity and they got to work doing community outreach! **They raffled off a $50 gas card, which is how much it would cost to get to the next town with a post office to pick up their mail**, and they convened an hour before the meeting to make sure that their most eloquent speakers had their points in order.

In preparation for the meeting, leaders of this effort developed a series of testimonies and questions that covered different and relevant topics related to the value of the post office. They included points from small businesses, information on weather conditions and travel to the next town over, and more. Appropriate community members were then approached to give a testimony and ask a question.

Once the USPS community meeting was about to start, a retired state trooper took on the role as facilitator. He stood up, welcomed the USPS to Summer Lake, and allowed them to give their presentation. When it came time for community input, the retired state trooper called on folks and ensured that every single Summer Lake resident had their questions addressed by the USPS representative.

The USPS wanted public input, and they got it! Summer Lake addressed the demographics and how reliant their community health is on the postal service, connectivity and lack of access to internet, the impact on local businesses, and they even printed out the USPS map where Summer Lake is mislabeled 50 miles away. Soon after, the USPS announced that Summer Lake's post office was safe!

ROP will be helping communities track and organize around the new community meeting plans for Post Office cuts and closures. Whether your group wants to schedule its own meeting with a chosen local facilitator, or you just want to know what strategic and provocative questions to ask at your community meeting, ROP will be providing the tools and resources to make sure your community goes on record. Contact us at 503-543-8417 or Jessica@rop.org.

Sample Testimony for Your Community Meeting

General Talking Points for POStPlan: These points will not be shared by the USPS representative, but are excellent information for the audience to understand and for us to use to challenge the current proposal of hour cuts.

- **Reducing post office hours would save less than 1% of the USPS budget.** Postal regulations require that "postal service must provide a maximum degree of effective and regular services to rural areas, communities and small towns where post offices are not self-sustaining." Rural post offices are not self-sustaining, but the people require service.

- **Your handout shows a decline of 27% in retail visits. Is that for our community?** Where are the statistics that show the need for a reduction of 50% in hours? Why 4-hours? Why not 2-hours or 1-hour?

- **The USPS began pursuing rural post office closures and hour cuts because the Postal Service has been bankrupted, not because these post offices aren't making enough money.** In 2006, Congress passed the Postal Accountability and Enhancement Act, which forced the USPS to prefund retiree benefits 75-years in advance, and to pay all of that money in $5.5 billion payments within ten years.

Local Data and Impact: As is evident from Summer Lake's success story, having researched points and questions is important. Here are the questions they asked:

Logistics:
1. Our post office is 23-miles away from the nearest Post Office. The route goes over a mountain pass and is incredibly dangerous for us to traverse. The second nearest post office is 30-miles away on a dangerous road, especially in the winter.

2. It would cost $x in gas to travel to the nearest post office twice a week. This is $x annually, x% of the average income in Summer Lake.

Demographics:
3. Our community is primarily elderly with an incredible reliance on receiving their prescriptions by mail. Many do not drive. Closing our post office would be detrimental to their health.

4. x% of our community is living under the poverty level. Driving to the nearest post office isn't feasible.

Connectivity:
5. x% of the community doesn't have access to internet service. We rely on the mail to communicate, to order and receive goods, and to pay our bills.

Sample Testimony for Your Community Meeting (Continued)

Businesses:
6. x% of businesses in Summer Lake rely on the post office to mail out packages. Many folks own their small business as a secondary source of income and need Saturday and their lunch hours to send packages and mail.

Security:
7. Theft is a serious issue in Summer Lake. Locked boxes at the end of the road are not the answer.

They also shared research on:

- Dangerous weather conditions
- The supposed savings the USPS would be making off of closing the Post Office
- The USPS misquoted the lease amount for their Post Office
- The USPS' map to show that the USPS didn't even know where they were located
- Finally, they asked the hard question: "70% of post offices don't make a profit. What is the arbitrary number you chose that put Summer Lake on the closure list?"

Tips for Organizing for Your Community Meeting

The Community Meeting is a great opportunity to make very clear to the USPS what our communities really want. Planning ahead and getting creative will make this all the more powerful. The easiest and most basic approach is to have some talking points and questions planned out ahead of time. But getting more visible with signs, banners, or even your own presentation increases the impact and makes it harder for the USPS to claim that our communities chose "hour cuts and service reduction."

Summer Lake's success wasn't just because of their well-researched questions – **it was their strategic community organizing.** Here are the key organizing steps they took:

1. Summer Lake rescheduled their meeting so it was in the evening and accessible to most residents. They were vigilant – the USPS tried resisting the time-change, but the asserted that every community member had a right to be at that meeting.

2. They chose a venue that would fit their community instead of the tiny room the USPS had reserved.

3. Summer Lake had everyone arrive an hour early in order to prepare questions, using a $50 gas card raffle to pique interest.

4. They were prepared to be visible, vocal, and to demonstrate the value and need of maintaining full service of their post office, even though the community meeting agenda planned by the USPS didn't create space for this.

5. Everyone was prepared to remain respectful, but assertive.

6. A respected retired state trooper facilitated the meeting from beginning to end.

7. When the USPS representative tried to leave, they asserted that they had not submitted all of their input and kept that representative there until they finished giving their testimony and asking their questions.

Other tips to consider:

⇒ **Send out an alternate survey – an example is included – to everyone who utilizes your post office.** Have someone local collect these surveys and share results at the community meeting. Make copies and send them to ROP so we can compile a statewide case for rural post offices.

⇒ **Be visible.** Consider making signs, stickers, or buttons. Post your signs around the room, have folks hold signs in prominent parts of the room, or even out front as people enter for the meeting.

Tips for Organizing for Your Community Meeting (Continued)

⇒ **Circulate a petition – an example is included – to show that your entire community is on record.** Ask businesses to collect signatures. Put them in the library, the country store, churches, etc. Make copies and send them to ROP.

⇒ **Do your own presentation.** Get a group together to figure out your testimony, to do research, and then make sure you give your presentation immediately after the USPS finishes. This sets the tone for the rest of the community input!

⇒ **Hold strong on having your voices heard.** Knowing that the USPS is only planning to spend 2-hours in your town and that they will give a presentation, you might consider standing up and asking when they will be taking public input. If they try to leave early, try to keep them there. If they do leave, make sure they know they haven't heard all of your input.

⇒ **Have a sign-in sheet.** You may be meeting new people who are interested in working on saving your post office with you. Make sure you get their names addresses, phone numbers, and email addresses so you can stay connected.

⇒ **Invite your elected officials.** Testimony from Senators to your local dogcatcher holds a lot of weight with the USPS, and we have seen that federal legislators can save post offices from behind the scenes.

⇒ **Get media!** Invite the local media. Letters to the editor are quick to write and everyone who gets the newspaper glances at them. Save everything published in case you need to later appeal a post office closure.

Information About the USPS Survey

The USPS will be sending a survey to a randomly selected group of community members soon as a legal requirement to get public input on changes to our post office. You may or may not be one of the people who receive the USPS survey. The USPS survey is full of technical jargon and misleading language that can be difficult to understand. **If you do receive the USPS survey, this document is designed to help you fill it out. Below is what each proposed option means and what the impact would be on our post office:**

IF YOU WANT YOUR POST OFFICE TO REMAIN OPEN WITH FULL SERVICES AND A FULL-TIME POSTMASTER, DO NOT CHOOSE OPTION 1, 2, 3, OR 4:

Option 1: Cutting window service hours will eliminate the Postmaster position in your community, reduce use of the post office, and can lead to eventual closure. Imagine what happens if they cannot find someone to fill an extremely part-time position with a smaller salary and fewer benefits.

Option 2: "Conduct a discontinuance study," means close your post office. Your rural letter carrier will not have the time, the training, or the material to provide full postal services and you will have to catch them as they drive past your rural mailbox. "Alternate access points," means the post office in the nearest town.

Option 3: "A contractor" will not weigh parcels, register, certify, or insure mail, sell passports or money orders, handle express, COD, return receipts, international or any number of postal services. A "contractor" is not a trained, sworn postal employee and may go out of business at any time.

Option 4: "Relocate" means close your post office.

DO WRITE IN: "Keep full service hours with a full-time postmaster"

DO WRITE IN: "My preference for window service hours each weekday would be full service: 8am – 5pm" (or whatever full service means for your community)

DO WRITE IN: "Additional Comments:" (reasons why your town needs full service full-time)

Make a copy, mail in the survey, and bring your copy to the USPS community meeting as testimony!

Alternate Survey

Dear Rural Oregonian,

The U.S. Postal Service is sending a survey to our community asking for our input on changes they want to make to our Post Office. The USPS survey does not include the opportunity to share how reducing our hours, closing our post office, or moving our post office into a nearby business will impact our community. The survey also does not include the option of keeping full-time operation and a full-time postmaster. More information on the USPS survey and how to fill it out is included on the next page.

Please fill out ***this*** survey to convey how you feel about changes to our postal service and mail it to: [INSERT LOCAL ADDRESS HERE]. The survey results will be presented to the USPS as testimony to the value this post office holds for our community.

Other than buying stamps, what does your Post Office do for your community?

Would it be difficult for you to get to the nearest town with a post office?

How much would it cost you to get to the next closest post office? Please take into account gas, time off of work, etc.:

Do you rely on the Post Office to receive your prescription medications?

How would your town be impacted if the post office reduced its hours or closed completely?

How will small businesses be impacted if the post office reduced its hours or closed completely?

If your post office were able to offer other services, what would you like to see?

Name:

Address:

Phone: Email:

Save Our Rural Post Office

UNITED STATES POSTAL SERVCE:

✓ No cuts, no closure! Our Post Office is essential to our community's health!

✓ We want our Post Office open full-time with full services and a Postmaster!

Name	Address	Date	Phone/Email

Sample Outreach Letter to Invite People to Help Save the Post Office

Dear Neighbor,

I am writing you this letter because I care about our community and I care about our post office.

There are not many things you can count on these days, but you do know that if you drop a piece of paper into the mailbox with a 45-cent stamp on it, in a few days it'll arrive at its destination.

When you live in rural or poor America, you understand the reality of not being connected. You don't get cable, your dish doesn't work, broadband is miles away, and the list goes on. The postal service was designed to make sure that this entire nation got the same services. We made a commitment to such equality in our Constitution even though getting mail to some parts of the great state of Oregon, 10th largest landmass in the United States, costs more than to others.

In rural America, we are especially feeling the impact of the economic crisis. Good, stable and well paying jobs are harder to come by. Cutting jobs at the US Postal Service is the last thing our country needs. These times make it all the more clear why we need our basic public institutions and why those institutions should be remain owned by the people and for the people, not by corporate CEOs on Wall Street.

The postal service may need to update to stay current to the times, but we should find a way for the postal service to stay an anchor in every small town community. In many towns, the post office is the last standing of public spaces.

I am sending you this letter because I want to save our United States Postal Service, our small town post office and the good jobs it provides in our community. Rural Oregonians from all over the state are coming together to tell the USPS and the United States Congress that the postal service is about much more than making a profit -- it's about communication and community. We need to keep rural Oregon connected, we need good paying jobs and we need our postal service of, for and by the people.

Will you join me at our community meeting to share why you care about keeping our post office open?

DATE, TIME
Location

Signed,
Your neighbor

Additional Resources

For an updated list of publicly announced USPS meeting dates, times, and locations:
http://about.usps.com/news/electronic-press-kits/our-future-network/post-plan/welcome.htm

For a list of Oregon Post Offices and mail processing plants affected by the POStPlan:
http://www.rop.org/wp-content/uploads/Proposed-Rural-Post-Office-Hour-Cuts-Under-the-USPS-POStPlan.pdf

Join the Preserve Our Postal Service working group, a group of community advocates, retired Postmasters, and current postal workers working together to keep rural Oregon connected. Email Jessica@rop.org or call 503-543-8417.

Need other resources? Not sure if this information is current? Want help getting your community rallied? Check our website for updates at **www.rop.org** or contact the Rural Organizing Project directly at **Jessica@rop.org** or call **503-543-8417** – we are here to help you organize.

Keep on top of the news at www.savethepostoffice.com

Are you an urban ally? Join Portland Community and Postal Workers United. More information can be found here:
http://www.facebook.com/PortlandCommunityPostalWorkersUnited

UNITED STATES POSTAL SERVICE

Columbia City Post Office

97018

Potential Retail Operating Hours 4

Survey Results

After surveying the local community and posting information at the Columbia City Post Office, the results of the survey are as follows:

Number of Customer Surveys Mailed: 992

Total Number of Surveys Returned: 324

Total	Percent	
264	81%	Realignment of Hours
15	5%	Delivery Option
2	1%	Village Post Office Option
17	5%	Nearby Post Office Option
26	8%	No Selection Made

If you did not get an opportunity to complete the survey, please fill one out while you are here.

After reviewing the surveys that were returned, and taking into account Postal Service operational needs, retail hours for this location will likely be:

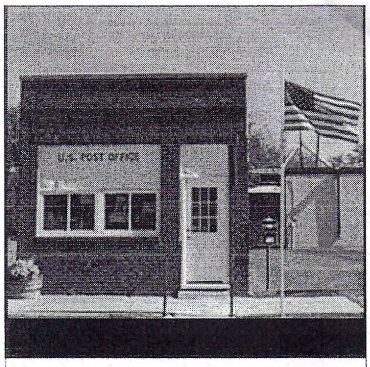
Mon-Fri 10:00 AM to 2:00 PM

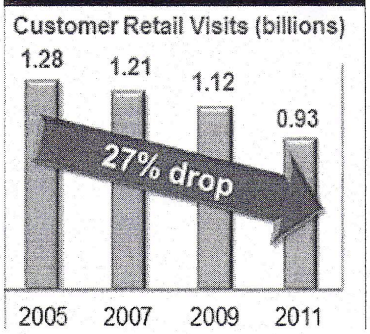
Total Saturday window service hours will not be reduced and access to delivery receptacles will not change as a result of the POST Plan realignment of weekday window service hours. We will take into account all information received at this meeting before making a final decision. Access to delivery receptacles will not be reduced from current hours.

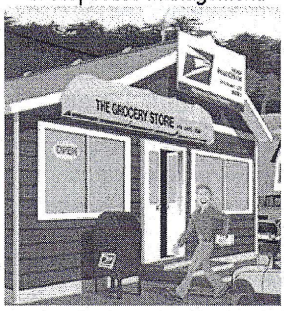
For additional information, please go to https://usps.com/ourfuturenetwork and click on the link under "Preserving Post Offices"

NEARBY POST OFFICES/ALTERNATIVE OPTIONS

	Miles Away
SAINT HELENS	2.7
SCAPPOOSE	10.2
RAINIER	16.4





VILLAGE POST OFFICE

Village Post Offices are located within existing communities in a variety of locations, such as local retailers, libraries, town halls or government centers, and are run by the proprietor or respective management.