

NRLCA Board Cancels 2020 National Convention

Less than two months ago, the world as we knew it changed. For the first time in our lives, we are facing a global pandemic. Your National Board has worked day and night to stay on top of rapidly changing information about COVID-19 and its impact on the Postal Service and our bargaining unit, conferring with Postal headquarters, and keeping the field informed about changes to work rules and procedures.

Unfortunately, the state convention season never got started. Every state association made the difficult decision to cancel its state convention. We fully supported these decisions. For many weeks now, we have wrestled with what to do about bringing together thousands of rural letter carrier delegates and non-delegates, retirees, juniors, auxiliary members, and their families from every corner of the country for our National Convention in Spokane, Washington this August.

After considerable discussion, extensive research, consultation with numerous government officials and public health experts, and input from state presidents and their boards, the National Board has decided that in order to best protect the safety and health of our craft and our loved ones, the most prudent course of action is to cancel the 2020 National Convention.

Why We Made This Decision

The Facts:

Like many of you, we have been doing a lot of reading about COVID-19 and what is likely to come over the next months or even year. In addition to newspaper reports, we have kept up to date by reading daily briefings and monitoring information put out by Kaiser Health News, the CDC, WHO, Johns Hopkins University, and the Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation in Washington State ("IHME"). These sources make clear that, by even the most optimistic forecasts, the COVID-19 pandemic will not be ending any time soon.

The numbers right now are deeply concerning. As of May 4, 2020, the total number of COVID-19 cases worldwide is 3.4 million with 246,747 deaths. In the U.S. there have been almost 1.2 million positive cases, more than five times the number of cases in

Spain, the country with the second highest number of cases. And the numbers continue to rise. Over the past week, the U.S. reported approximately 30,000 new cases of COVID-19 per day, but that number is likely higher given the lack of widespread testing. More than 68,000 Americans have died, and COVID-19 is now the leading cause of death in some regions of the country. Seventeen states are still seeing an increase in the number of confirmed new cases each day. While some states have been hit harder than others, it is clear the virus has found its way into many smaller, rural communities. In fact, some of the most serious recent outbreaks have been in small towns where meatpacking and food processing plants are located.

Mass Gathering Restrictions in Washington State and the Rest of the Nation will be with us for the Foreseeable Future:

While some states have started the long and deliberate process of relaxing restrictions and opening businesses, other states have yet to see their peak infections and are still shut down. The IHME recently reported that for 18 states, the earliest date after which social distancing may be relaxed is June 8. However, that is only with containment strategies that include testing, contact tracing, isolation, and limiting gathering size. Only then can a multi-phase reopening process begin.

Even as some states lift their stay-at-home orders, most states continue to prohibit large meetings or gatherings. Washington State, host to this year's national convention, is part of a Western States Pact with California, Oregon, Nevada, and Colorado. Those states intend to take a cautious, science-based, and phased-in approach to reopening and mass gatherings will be the last activities to return. Many public health experts, including an infectious disease physician and professor fighting on the front lines at New York University's Langone Medical Center, have suggested that we will not see mass gatherings again until there is a vaccine (likely a year from now) or at least an effective treatment. That physician spent an hour on a Zoom call with the National Board discussing these issues and answering our questions.

In Washington State, Governor Jay Inslee announced that recovery will be gradual, data-driven, and health focused. The safe, healthy path back to normal requires: more testing, contact tracing capabilities, personal protection equipment for all who need it, and ensuring adequate capacity in the state's health care system. Until then, preventing another outbreak is Governor Inslee's priority, which means continued teleworking,

distance learning, and physical distancing, opening some industries faster than others, re-imposing restrictions if another outbreak occurs, and prohibiting most large gatherings.

At almost 3,000 delegates and guests, our National Convention qualifies as a mass gathering. Thus, questions remain as to whether the State of Washington would even permit us to gather in Spokane in August. But even if we could be assured that we could legally convene the convention, we still have serious concerns about the health and safety of our members. Over half of our delegates last year were 60 years old or older, which puts them into a high-risk group as mortality rates are significantly higher for older Americans. Many other delegates and guests may be high risk for other reasons, including pre-existing health conditions such as asthma, hypertension, diabetes, and heart disease.

There is little we can do to protect conference attendees from infection. Even if the virus is almost gone in some areas of the countries, others may still be seeing cases, and we will have members traveling from all over. Many people with COVID-19 do not show symptoms, but can still very effectively transmit the virus to others. We worry about how to maintain social distancing in a convention environment where delegates sit shoulder to shoulder for eight hours a day. There is no way to maintain six-foot spacing around each delegate. As most attendees will fly to Spokane, we also worry about air travel – in terms of flight availability, safety on planes, and the likelihood of a low turnout. We still have the flu outbreak from Grand Rapids fresh in our minds, and we worry about an outbreak of this much more serious disease. What if everyone at the convention had to be quarantined for 14 days? What if some – or even one – of our members had to be hospitalized or died? We are not prepared to take that risk.

The Experts Agree That We Should Cancel

We have not made the decision to cancel the Convention alone without the benefit of guidance from public health professionals. Last month, we reached out to a host of experts, including a Dean at the Johns Hopkins School of Public Health and a former Secretary of Health for the State of Maryland. He stated that, if the Union had to make a decision as to whether to cancel now, his advice would be to cancel. The NYU infectious disease physician, mentioned above, likewise advised the Union to cancel. In his call with the Board, he discussed the high mortality rate of the disease – a rate that

increases dramatically with age – and the high infection rate, explaining that an infected person entering a room of healthy people would likely infect 3-5 people with COVID-19, and even more if they were symptomatic. This is a much higher rate than that of Influenza A, which sickened hundreds of convention attendees in Grand Rapids. That doctor also advised that many physicians’ and scientists’ organizations are canceling conferences even beyond August. He warned that restrictions will be in place for quite some time and we are likely to see a resurgence of infections – a “second wave” – later in the year.

The National Board also conducted a teleconference with Washington State’s Chief Infectious Diseases physician and the State Health Officer in Spokane, both of whom recommended that we cancel the convention. They informed us that other conferences and mass gatherings for the same time period in the state have already been canceled. Additionally, the Spokane Health Officer expressed serious concern about us bringing thousands of people to his city and very possibly bringing the virus with us. His concern was as much for the citizens of Spokane as it was for our delegates and guests.

Input from the State Associations

We have worked hard from the beginning to include the state presidents in regular teleconferences in order to share both COVID-19 updates and developments with the Postal Service. We also appreciate the feedback and information sharing we have received from the state officers. Early last week we asked the state presidents to seek input from their boards on the question of whether or not to hold the 2020 National Convention. During the week we received feedback from a number of states and during another teleconference on Sunday night each state board, through the state president, was able to weigh in with its own views about the National Convention. The state boards indicated their overwhelming support for canceling the convention. Several delegations went so far as to suggest that if the convention were held as scheduled, they would not attend. Others expressed concern about the general welfare of their delegates and concerns about travel, sanitary conditions at the hotel/meeting spaces, restaurant options, and liability issues.

So Why Decide Now?

Some of you might be asking why we are making this decision now, months before the convention. While we certainly do not know what the state of things will be in August,

we are, for all the reasons stated above, quite certain they will not be back to normal then. As you know, months of planning and work go into putting on such a large event with so many moving parts. Many vendor contracts will need to be canceled. Once our hotel room block is opened, individuals start making reservations and travel plans, and it only gets more difficult to call things off if, as the experts expect, safety and health concerns will require us to do so. The financial impact and practical costs in terms of taking our focus and resources away from dealing with the other pandemic-related issues on top of our usual business only worsen as time goes on. We simply cannot afford to put this decision off any longer.

We'll Get Through This Together

This pandemic has shown us the power and necessity of solidarity. Though we will not be together in August, rest assured we will continue to monitor the effects of COVID-19 on our craft and on our employer and represent each member of the bargaining unit to the best of our abilities. Responding to this pandemic has truly been a team effort at every level of our Union and we are proud to say that our team is united and strong.

We look forward to seeing you at the 2021 National Convention, which is scheduled to take place in Orlando, FL during the week of August 16.

Your National Board

<https://www.nrlca.org/News/1151>