



Sending Mail to Members of the Armed Forces at Reduced or Free Postage: An Overview

Kevin R. Kosar

Analyst in American National Government

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Summary

Members of the Armed Forces on duty in designated combat areas can send personal correspondence, free of postage, to addresses in the United States.

However, there never has been a comparable policy to permit individuals in the United States to send letters and packages to troops serving overseas. That said, the federal government does subsidize the postage an individual pays to send mail to troops. A sender is charged only for the cost of the domestic portion of the delivery—the Department of Defense pays the cost to move the mail from the United States to troops overseas. Additionally, since October 2008 the U.S. Postal Service has offered a discounted package service to families wishing to send packages to members of the Armed Services stationed overseas.

Legislation—H.R. 704 and H.R. 707—has been introduced in the 111th Congress to establish a free-mail-to-troops postage benefit. Each of these bills would provide members of the Armed Forces serving overseas with free-postage vouchers every month. Recipients of these vouchers would be able to transfer them to family members or other persons in the United States, who then could use the vouchers to mail a letter or package to the troops postage-free. Both of these bills have been referred to the House Committee on Armed Services' Subcommittee on Military Personnel.

Similar legislation was introduced in the 110th and 109th Congresses, but failed to be enacted for reasons unclear.

The potential cost of either H.R. 704 or H.R. 707 to the federal government is unknown. The Congressional Budget Office has not scored either bill, and neither piece of legislation details the means through which the postage benefit is to be administered. Nor do the bills place any restrictions on the dimensions of a package that may be shipped with a voucher, although the shape of a package significantly affects the U.S. Postal Service's costs to deliver it.

This report will be updated to reflect significant legislative action.

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Background

The U.S. Postal Service (USPS) has a long relationship with the Department of Defense (DOD) to facilitate correspondence and the exchange of gifts between service personnel and their families. Post offices throughout the country accept mail and packages for military personnel and deliver these items to military installations in the United States. Overseas military mail delivery is somewhat more complicated. The USPS delivers mail and packages to USPS gateway sites in New York, Newark, San Francisco, Miami, and Chicago. Domestic postage covers the cost of this service. The cost of transporting the mail from those sites to overseas Army/Air Force Post Offices (APOs) and Fleet Post Offices (FPOs) that serve members of the Armed Forces is borne by the military mail service. For mailers, then, the postage is subsidized—they pay only the domestic portion of the cost.

When the Armed Forces are engaged in combat or other dangerous activities, the President has the authority to permit service members to send personal correspondence, free of charge, to places within the delivery limits of a U.S. post office (39 U.S.C. 3401(a)(1)).¹ This privilege is currently available to service members in Iraq, Afghanistan, and certain surrounding countries and seas, and to service personnel hospitalized in a military facility as a consequence of service in the designated areas. The DOD pays the USPS for the costs of delivering this mail from the U.S. gateway sites to any domestic address. Free mail must have a complete APO or FPO return address and the word “free” written in the upper right corner with an APO or FPO postmark.

However, citizens of the United States have never been authorized to send mail to service members, whether overseas or not, without paying postage. It is the case that the government created “V-Mail” as a means for Americans to correspond with members of the Armed Forces during World War II.² But only members of the Armed Forces could send V-Mail free of postage. Families and friends had to pay postage at the standard rates of the day.

Current Costs for Mailers

Those wishing to send correspondence to members of the Armed Forces overseas currently pay postage between \$0.42 and \$0.93 per letter (1 to 3.5 ounces) and \$0.83 and \$2.87 for larger envelopes (1 to 13 ounces).³

Someone wishing to send a package will pay the standard domestic package postage rates, which are calculated on a range of factors, including package size, shape, weight, etc.⁴ Alternatively, a

¹ The authority was delegated to the Secretary of Defense by Executive Order 12556 on April 18, 1986. For a list of overseas assignment locations eligible for the free mail privilege, see “Free Mail Program for U.S. Armed Forces,” *Postal Bulletin* 22224, January 17, 2008, pp. 12-13, at <http://www.usps.com/cpim/ftp/bulletin/2008/pb22224.pdf>.

² Designed to economize on weight and space, V-Mail letters were written on forms that could be purchased at retail stores or post offices. The forms were microfilmed, dispatched around the world, and then reproduced at a mail center near the recipient’s location. No enclosures were permitted. See “V-Mail,” National Postal Museum website, at http://www.postalmuseum.si.edu/exhibits/2d2a_vmail.html.

³ These prices will increase on May 11, 2009. See http://pe.usps.com/PriceChange_May2009/PDF/PriceList/PriceList.pdf, p. 1.

⁴ See the postage calculator at <http://postcalc.usps.gov/>.

mailer may take advantage of the discounted APO/FPO Priority Mail Flat-Rate Box.⁵ A sender must pay \$11.95, a discount of \$2 off the standard postage for this 12” by 12” by 5” box.

The USPS also has offered “free Military kits” to military families who want to send packages overseas.

The mailing kits can be ordered by phone by calling 1-800-610-8734 and asking for the Care Kit. Each kit includes two Priority Mail boxes, six Priority Mail Flat-Rate boxes, eight Priority Mail labels, one roll of Priority Mail tape and eight customs forms with envelopes.⁶

The senders of one these packages must pay the discounted Priority Mail rate of \$11.95.⁷

Legislation

109th Congress

Representative Vito Fossella introduced H.R. 923, the Mailing Support to Troops Act of 2005, on February 17, 2005. As introduced, the bill would have allowed family members of military service personnel to mail letters and packages free of charge to active members of the military serving in Afghanistan or Iraq, and to servicemen and women hospitalized as a result of disease or injury suffered in Afghanistan or Iraq. To receive this free postage benefit, mailers simply would have written on the envelope or box “Free Matter for Member of the Armed Forces of the United States’ or words to that effect [as] specified by the Postal Service.” H.R. 923 would have forbidden this mail to contain advertisements. The bill would have authorized appropriations to reimburse the USPS for its extra expenses in transporting such mail.

Another approach to providing a free postage benefit was taken by Representative Harold E. Ford, Jr., in H.R. 2874, the Supply Our Soldiers Act of 2005, which was introduced on June 14, 2005.⁸ The bill would have provided a free postage benefit to both families of service members and charities. Soldiers mobilizing for overseas duty would have been given an allotment of special stamps (equivalent in value to \$150 per calendar quarter) to send to their families or selected charities. These stamps would have permitted them to mail letters and packages to service members without postage. There would have been a 10-pound limit on packages mailed, and the DOD would have reimbursed USPS for providing this service. By putting individual service members into the authorization chain for the mail they received, this bill would have avoided the problem of the free postage benefit being used to send unsolicited mail to the troops. Additionally, capping the allotment per service member would have mitigated potential stress on the military postal system. H.R. 2874 was referred to the House Committees on Armed Services and Government Reform.

⁵ For details on calculating postage and restrictions on package contents, see <http://www.usps.com/supportingoutroops/>.

⁶ U.S. Postal Service, “Support the Troops With Timely Holiday Mailing,” press release, October 8, 2008, http://www.usps.com/communications/newsroom/2008/pr08_102.htm. Some restrictions on contents do apply. See <http://www.usps.com/supportingoutroops/maillingrestrictions.htm>.

⁷ This rate will not rise on May 11, 2009. See http://pe.usps.com/PriceChange_May2009/PDF/PriceList/PriceList.pdf, p. 42.

⁸ H.R. 2874 superseded H.R. 887, a very similar bill introduced by Representative Ford on February 17, 2005.

On September 29, 2005, the House Government Reform Committee marked up H.R. 923 and, in doing so, adopted an amendment in the nature of a substitute that incorporated the core concept, as well as the title, of H.R. 2874. As amended and ordered to be reported by voice vote of the committee, the new version of H.R. 923 would have required the DOD, in consultation with the USPS, to establish a one-year program under which a qualified member of the Armed Forces would have received a monthly voucher. The voucher was transferable to a service member's family or friends, and would cover the postage to send one letter or parcel (weighing up to 15 pounds) to the service member. The Congressional Budget Office (CBO) estimated that nearly all of the about 145,000 American service personnel who would have been eligible for the postage benefit would have taken advantage of it, and assigned it a budget cost of \$30 million over FY2006 and FY2007.⁹

The House Armed Services Committee added the language of H.R. 923 as Sections 575, 576, and 577 of H.R. 5122, the John Warner National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2007. The House passed H.R. 5122 on May 11, 2006. On June 22, 2006, the Senate substituted its own defense authorization language for the House language and passed H.R. 5122. Neither the Senate version of the FY2007 authorization bill nor the conference report (H.Rept. 109-702) included the free-mail-for-troops provision.¹⁰

Thus, the free postage provision was not included in either the FY2007 defense authorization act (P.L. 109-364) or the FY2007 defense appropriations act (P.L. 109-289).

110th Congress

Representative Fossella and 13 cosponsors introduced H.R. 1439 on March 9, 2007. The bill would have established a postage benefit for members of the armed services on active duty in Iraq or Afghanistan, and for individuals who are "hospitalized at a facility under the jurisdiction of the Armed Forces of the United States as a result of a disease or injury incurred as a result of service in Iraq or Afghanistan." A beneficiary would receive one voucher per month, which he or she could have given to anyone who wished to send him or her a letter or parcel free of charge. The bill would have limited the weight of letters to no more than 13 ounces and parcels to no more than 15 pounds. H.R. 1439 would have authorized an appropriation to the DOD to cover the cost of this program to the USPS. H.R. 1439 was referred to the House Armed Services Committee.

Senator Hillary Clinton and two cosponsors introduced S. 1444 on June 6, 2007. This bill was very similar to H.R. 1439, although it would have limited packages to no more than 10 pounds, and it would have capped the cost of the free postage program at \$10 million in FY2008. S. 1444 was referred to the Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs, then to the Subcommittee on Federal Financial Management, Government Information, Federal Services, and International Security.

On May 16, 2007, Representative Fossella offered a floor amendment (H.Amdt. 184) to H.R. 1585, the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2008. The amendment was quite similar to H.R. 1439 and S. 1444. It would have required the Secretary of Defense to provide a

⁹ U.S. Congress, House Committee on Government Reform, Supply Our Soldiers Act of 2005, report to accompany H.R. 923, 109th Cong., 2nd sess., H.Rept. 109-268 (Washington: GPO, 2005), pp. 7-9.

¹⁰ The free-mail-for-troops measure was not included in either the House or Senate reports (H.Rept. 109-504, S.Rept. 109-292) on the FY2007 defense appropriations bills.

“qualified individual” with one voucher every other month. As in earlier bills, a “qualified individual” would have been defined as a member of the Armed Forces serving in Iraq or Afghanistan, or a member of the Armed Forces hospitalized under the care of the military. This individual could have given the voucher to anyone, who then could mail, at no charge, a parcel (up to 10 pounds) or first-class mail piece (up to 13 ounces) to the same qualified individual. H.Amdt. 184 was adopted by voice vote immediately.¹¹

The House passed H.R. 1585 with the postage benefit provision on May 17, 2007, by a vote of 397 to 267. Again, the Senate passed its version of the defense authorization bill without the postage benefit provision on October 1, 2007, by a vote of 92 to 3. The conference report (H.Rept. 110-477) filed on December 6, 2007, did not authorize an appropriation for the postage benefit.

111th Congress

Representative Peter King introduced H.R. 704, the Supply Our Soldiers Act of 2009, on January 27, 2009. Two days later, Representative Kathy Castor introduced H.R. 707, the Home Front to Heroes Postal Benefits Act. H.R. 704 and H.R. 707 were referred to the House Armed Services Committee, and then to its Subcommittee on Military Personnel. As of April 20, 2009, H.R. 704 has 29 cosponsors, and H.R. 707 has 234 cosponsors.

Like earlier bills, both H.R. 704 and H.R. 707 would provide one free-postage voucher per month to each “qualified individual” in the Armed Forces. Each voucher would provide free postage on letters weighing up to 13 ounces or packages weighing up to 15 pounds. The DOD would provide advance transfers of funds to the USPS to cover the Postal Service’s costs in delivering the mail to the APOs and FPOs. H.R. 704 and H.R. 707 would authorize this postage benefit for one year.

Though similar, H.R. 704 and 707 differ in two significant ways.

(1) H.R. 704, Sec. 2(b) defines a “qualified individual” as

a member of the Armed Forces of the United States on active duty (as defined in section 101 of title 10, United States Code); and ... serving in Iraq or Afghanistan ... or ... hospitalized at a facility under the jurisdiction of the Armed Forces of the United States as a result of a disease or injury incurred as a result of service in Iraq or Afghanistan.

10 U.S.C. 101(d)(1) defines “active duty” to mean

full-time duty in the active military service of the United States. Such term includes full-time training duty, annual training duty, and attendance, while in the active military service, at a school designated as a service school by law or by the Secretary of the military department concerned. Such term does not include full-time National Guard duty.

Meanwhile, H.R. 707, Sec. 2(b) defined a “qualified individual” as “a member of the Armed Forces described in subsection (a)(1) of section 3401 of title 39, United States Code, who is entitled to free mailing privileges under such section.” This definition of “qualified individual” may be broader than the definition included in H.R. 704 because 39 U.S.C. 3401(a)(1) includes

¹¹ Rep. Vito Fossella, *Congressional Record*, vol. 153, part 81 (May 16, 2007), pp. H5243-H5244.

an individual who is a member of the Armed Forces of the United States on active duty, as defined in [10 U.S.C. 101], or a civilian, otherwise authorized to use postal services at Armed Forces installations, who holds a position or performs one or more functions in support of military operations, as designated by the military theater commander....

(2) H.R. 704 does not define who may use a postage voucher. H.R. 707, Section 2(e) would permit qualified individuals to transfer a voucher to “a member of the family of the qualified individual, a nonprofit organization, or any other person selected by the qualified individual for use to send qualified mailings to the qualified individual or other qualified individuals.”

Conclusion: Observations and Possible Questions for Congress

The recent postage benefit bills prompt at least two observations and four questions.

Observations

(1) It is unclear whether any concerns exist about the voucher-type free postage proposals. As indicated above, during the 109th and 110th Congresses, measures similar to H.R. 704 and H.R. 707 failed to be enacted during the House-Senate conferences on the DOD bills. In each instance, the House bill carried the free postage benefit, and the Senate bill did not. The conference committee reports did not elaborate on why the Senate version was preferred, and the Congressional Research Service has not located any published accounts that detail any objections to these postage benefit bills.

(2) It is unclear how much H.R. 704 and H.R. 707 would cost the federal government. To date, the CBO has not scored either of these bills. During the 109th Congress, the CBO did score the final version of H.R. 923, a measure that would have provided a similar postage benefit. It estimated the bill would have cost \$30 million for the 2006 calendar year, “including \$17 million for postage, and \$13 million for the DoD’s transportation and administrative costs.”¹²

Possible Questions

(1) Neither H.R. 704 nor H.R. 707 describe the means through which the DOD is to provide postage vouchers to military personnel overseas; nor do the bills describe how these individuals would transfer these vouchers to family members or friends back in the United States. Both H.R. 704 and H.R. 707 require the DOD to devise the means for administering the benefit. Will voucher recipients be required to mail the vouchers? (The CBO’s scoring of H.R. 923 during the 109th Congress, it should be noted, did not include an estimate of the costs of either voucher distribution to military personnel or voucher transference to persons in the United States.)

(2) What precautions would be adopted to ensure that vouchers were not counterfeited? Is there any risk that individuals could sell or trade postage vouchers for cash?

¹² Congressional Budget Office, “Cost Estimate: H.R. 923 Supply Our Soldiers Act of 2005,” October 14, 2005, at <http://cbo.gov/ftpdocs/67xx/doc6782/hr923.pdf>, p. 2.

(3) Both H.R. 704 and H.R. 707 would permit a voucher to be used either to send correspondence or a package. Currently, a mailer must pay \$0.42 and \$0.93 in postage for a letter (1 to 3.5 ounces), and \$0.83 and \$2.87 in postage for a larger envelope (1 to 13 ounces). Would these relatively low-cost mailings require further government subsidies?¹³ And are senders likely to use a voucher for letters that can be used to cover the more expensive postage package?

(4) The dimensions and shape of a package significantly affect the USPS's costs to deliver it.¹⁴ For example, mailing 15 pounds of widgets in a 20" by 4" by 4" package (320 cubic inches) from the Silver Lake, Ohio zip code 44224 to the APO zip code 96278-2050 would require over \$20 in postage. Sending the same 15 pounds of widgets in a 12" by 12" by 5" Priority Mail Flat-Rate Box (720 cubic inches) would cost \$11.95. (Whether the DOD experiences similar cost differences for package delivery is unclear.) To reduce delivery costs, should H.R. 704 and H.R. 707 require voucher recipients to use a box of a particular size and shape?

Author Contact Information

Kevin R. Kosar
Analyst in American National Government
kkosar@crs.loc.gov, 7-3968

¹³ As noted on page 1 of this report, mailers pay postage only for the domestic portion of the delivery.

¹⁴ Computations come from the postage calculator at <http://postcalc.usps.gov/>.