

CRS Report for Congress

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Free Mail for Troops Overseas

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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. There has never been a comparable provision of free postage for letters or packages sent from family members in the United States to loved ones in wartime service overseas. Two bills (H.R. 923 and H.R. 2874) have been introduced that would allow family members and, in the case of H.R. 2874, certain charities to send letters and packages to servicemen and women in combat zones free of postage.

In a markup on September 29, 2005, the House Committee on Government Reform reported H.R. 923 in amended form as a bill that would allow service members overseas to send vouchers to family or loved ones that would be redeemable for the postage expenses of one letter or 15-pound package per month.

This report will be updated in the event of any further legislative action.

The U.S. Postal Service (USPS) has long had a relationship with the Department of Defense which is designed 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 them to military installations in the United States. Overseas military mail delivery is a little more complicated. USPS delivers mail and packages to army/air force post office (APO) and fleet post office (FPO) 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 service members overseas is borne by the military mail service, though USPS commonly arranges for the transportation and is reimbursed by the military. In a sense, then, the postage cost is a bargain, because the actual costs of distribution throughout the world to dispersed military units greatly exceed the normal costs on which domestic postage rates are based.

When the armed forces are engaged in combat or other dangerous activities, the President has authority under 39 U.S.C. §3401 to permit service members to send personal correspondence, free of charge, to places within the delivery limits of a U.S. post office. 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 result of disease or injury resulting from service in the designated areas.¹ The Defense Department pays 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, it has never been authorized for citizens in the United States to send mail to service members, whether overseas or not, without paying postage. During World War II, the government created “V-Mail” as a means for Americans to correspond with loved ones overseas. In order to economize on weight and space, V-Mail letters were written on forms that could be purchased at retail stores or the post office. The forms were micro-filmed, dispatched around the world, and then reproduced at a mail center near the recipient’s location. No enclosures were permitted. V-Mail letters were sent free of postage by members of the armed forces, but when sent by others, they carried pre-paid postage at the standard rates that prevailed then — three cents for ordinary mail, and six cents for air mail.

Today, sending packages to service members overseas can be quite expensive. It costs \$86.50 to send a 20-pound package by international Express Mail from the United States to Iraq. USPS will charge domestic postage of \$53.45 to send a 20-pound package from a ZIP Code in Michigan to an APO address in New York (but destinating in Europe) by Express Mail. On the other hand, it can be much less expensive to send the same package to the same address by Priority Mail (\$19.75), Parcel Post (\$11.98), or, for books, the Media Mail rate (\$7.84). There is limited advantage to using Express Mail rates to speed a package bound for Iraq to New York overnight, when the package will then be turned over to the military mail delivery system and be treated like all other packages for transport overseas to military units. It might save three or four days at the outset of the package’s journey, but will not result in expedited service overseas, which is likely to be a journey of many more days.²

Should Mail Sent to Service Members Overseas be Free?

Constituents frequently contact Members of Congress with the suggestion that the free mail privilege should be extended to letters and packages sent from this country and addressed to American armed forces personnel serving in dangerous areas overseas. They point out that because such communication is an important link with home and contributes to morale, it would make sense to remove any economic disincentives to send letters, photos, “care packages,” or audio tapes to those in active military operations. They suggest that it is a commonsense extension of the already existing subsidy for such items to be sent from combat areas to home.

¹ The authority was delegated to the Secretary of Defense by Executive Order 12556 on April 18, 1986. For a current list of overseas assignment locations eligible for the free mail privilege, see “Free Mail Program,” *Postal Bulletin* 22097, March 6, 2003, p. 26, available at [<http://www.usps.com/cpim/ftp/bulletin/2003/pb22097.pdf>]

² On the other hand, USPS says that it does meet the three-day guaranteed delivery standard for Express Mail to long-established bases in Germany and other European countries.

The case for free mail to overseas service members is not quite comparable to that of free mail privileges for soldiers, however. For troops in a wartime situation, U.S. postage stamps, and American coins to purchase them, are likely not to be readily available. The population of eligible soldiers is somewhat confined, and collection/authorization of the mail limited to a relatively few APO and FPO locations. Their economic circumstances may also be more constricted than those of correspondents in United States, on the whole.

Extending free mailing privileges to anyone in the United States who wishes to communicate with American soldiers could involve some practical difficulties. Removing any cost considerations essentially would give anyone with printing equipment, an address list, and a message free license to flood the mails, in ways that might not always be appreciated by recipients. Large-scale communications such as from advertisers, religious organizations, or pro-war or anti-war groups might be difficult to exclude. If eligibility were limited to family members of service personnel, this would add a burden of verification on postal clerks to determine who qualifies as “family.”

Handling mail that substitutes the handwritten word “free” for a postage stamp or indicia also will incur some added processing costs. Current postage rates are based on heavy use of automation; for example, the initial sorting of most mail is fully automated, as “facercanceller” machines sense chemicals in postage stamps, turn the envelopes forward and right side up, cancel the stamps, read address bar codes, and send mail to sorting trays without human intervention. Individual pieces of mail sent without postage, indicia, or bar codes, would involve some degree of non-automated handling and perhaps some verification of the relationship to the recipient. The Postal Service would no doubt expect to be reimbursed through congressional appropriations for its costs in providing free or discounted service to a segment of the population, just as it is currently reimbursed for services it provides for the blind and overseas voters.³

Legislation in the 109th Congress

Legislation has been introduced in previous years to provide free mailing privileges for letters and packages to American troops overseas. Two bills have been introduced into the 109th Congress — H.R. 923 and H.R. 2874. (H.R. 2874 supercedes H.R. 887, a very similar bill introduced by Representative Ford on February 17, 2005.)

H.R. 923, the Mailing Support to Troops Act of 2005 (introduced on February 17, 2005 by Representative Fossella, with 71 current cosponsors), in its original form would allow family members of 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. Mailers would only need to write 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.” Mail matter that contains any advertising would specifically be excluded. H.R. 923 would authorize appropriations to reimburse USPS for its extra expenses in transporting such mail. H.R. 923 was referred to the Committee on Government Reform.

³ For more information on existing free mail subsidies, see CRS Report RS21025, *The Postal Revenue Forgone Appropriation, Overview and Current Issues*, by Nye Stevens.

H.R. 2874, the Supply Our Soldiers Act of 2005, was introduced by Representative Ford on June 14, 2005, and has 31 cosponsors. It would attempt to make it easier for families and charities to ship letters and packages to soldiers serving in combat zones. Soldiers mobilizing for overseas duty would be given an allotment of special stamps (equivalent in value to \$150 per calendar quarter) that they can send to their loved ones, or to selected charities, to allow them to send letters and packages without further postage to the service members. There would be a 10-pound limit on packages sent to individuals. The Postal Service would be reimbursed by the Defense Department for providing this service, and section 3 of the bill would authorize appropriations to the Defense Department for this purpose and for any other expenses it incurs. By putting individual service men and women into the authorization chain for the mail they receive, this bill would avoid the problem of subsidizing unsolicited mail to the troops. Additionally, by capping the allotment per service member, it would mitigate potential stress on the military postal system. H.R. 2874 was referred to the Committees on Armed Services and Government Reform.

On September 29, 2005, the House Committee on Government Reform marked up H.R. 923, and in doing so, accepted an amendment in the nature of a substitute that adopted the core concept, as well as the title, of H.R. 2874. As amended and reported by voice vote of the Committee, H.R. 923 requires the Department of Defense, in consultation with the Postal Service, to establish a one-year program under which qualified members of the armed services would receive a monthly voucher that can be redeemed, by their families or friends, to pay the postal expenses of sending one letter or parcel (weighing up to 15 pounds) to the service member. The Department of Defense would reimburse the Postal Service for the postal benefits provided by the vouchers. Committee Chairman Tom Davis said that the substitute language had the approval of Representative Fossella, the Committee on Armed Services, and the Postal Service.