



Statement of Steven Sultan Deputy Chief Counsel of the U.S. Postal Inspection Service

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I am Steven Sultan, United States Postal Inspector, and Acting Chief Counsel for the U.S. Postal Inspection Service. The Postal Inspection Service is the federal law enforcement and security arm of the United States Postal Service. Our agency works diligently to enforce criminal laws to protect the U.S. Postal Service (“USPS” or “Postal Service”) employees, customers, and our nation’s mailstream. I recognize that your constituents depend on the Postal Service for safe and reliable transmittal of mail, and I thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today.

Unfortunately, mail theft and robberies of USPS letter carriers have risen dramatically. Robberies of USPS letter carriers have traditionally occurred because the assailant sought to steal personal items from the carrier, such as cell phones, jewelry or cash. Over the past few years, however, we have seen a shift in criminal activity. Organized criminal groups have increasingly sought to rob USPS letter carriers for their postal keys, in order to steal U.S. Mail from receptacles and commit financial crimes. Postal keys, sometimes also called arrow keys, are keys that permit access to collection boxes, outdoor parcel lockers, cluster box units, and apartment panels in a given geographic area. The Postal Service and the Postal Inspection Service maintain accountability of postal keys to ensure they are not lost or stolen. However, this has led to robberies of carriers being a significant method criminals use to obtain keys.

Once in the hands of bad actors, criminals utilize the keys to steal large volumes of mail, which we call “volume attacks.” Criminals have always sought immediate financial gain through the theft of cash and merchandise in the mail. Criminals have also sought to steal checks in order to “wash,” or alter, the information on the check to fraudulently cash it. Often, these thefts were committed by people experiencing addiction issues for a for a quick payday and were relatively unsophisticated. However, the dark web and encrypted messaging apps have created forums that criminals exploit to sell stolen checks and personal identifying information to commit identity theft. This has shifted from the theft of mail being committed by lone actors and small informal groups to large, organized criminal elements. Stolen checks and personal identifying information are a new currency and are traded amongst criminals online with often devastating financial effects to victims.

To counter this trend, the Postal Service and the Postal Inspection Service launched the Project Safe Delivery initiative to prevent the theft of mail, to protect the mail and letter carriers, and to increase the enforcement of criminal laws. We are upgrading blue collection boxes with high security features, including electronic components. We are raising awareness through public education messaging and training our employees and law enforcement partners. And when robberies and mail theft do occur, postal inspectors enforce the laws that protect our employees and the nation's mail, collaborating with prosecutors and other law enforcement agencies at the federal, state, and local level.

The legislation before this committee would significantly enhance the ability of law enforcement to investigate robberies of letter carriers and the theft of mail in Maryland. For example, in the course of investigating a robbery, law enforcement will often catch a suspect in possession of the postal key taken from the carrier. Depending on the other evidence established, the suspect may or may not have been associated with the robbery. Unauthorized possession of a postal key is illegal federally, but under Maryland law these keys are not provided any special protection or status, even though they give criminals access to a vast amount of personal and financial information that may be contained in collection boxes, apartment panels, and other mail receptacles. This bill would fill this critical gap and give law enforcement the tools to charge those who we can only establish possessed the fruits of the robbery.

Additionally, the legislation before this committee seeks to update and modernize Maryland law to keep Marylanders' finances safe. In Maryland, basic theft charges lack the ability to effectively address the issue. Maryland grades theft by the value of the property, but mail containing PII is typically valueless for charging purposes. This bill recognizes that mail containing PII is extremely valuable to both victims and criminals and treats the theft of mail or possession of stolen mail as such.

The legislation proposed does not replace or usurp the federal laws on mail theft, financial crimes, and assault and robbery of federal employees. Rather, it is complimentary to existing federal law and the work being done in the federal court system. As discussed above, lone actors and informal criminal groups have largely been supplanted with sophisticated organized criminal elements. While federal charges may be appropriate for some members of the groups, state charges may be most appropriate for others. This law will give law enforcement and prosecutors the flexibility needed in many instances to seek justice, deterrence and rehabilitation. Further, as is the case with drug trafficking organizations, charging one member of the organization is often a way to build a case against a group's leadership. This bill would give federal law enforcement and prosecutors the ability to work together with Maryland law enforcement and prosecutors to investigate, disrupt and dismantle entire criminal organizations through a collaborative effort at the state and federal level.

Postal inspectors are proud to work diligently alongside local Maryland law enforcement and prosecutors to protect Maryland Postal Service employees and keep Maryland postal customers' mail safe, and this bill would enhance our ability to carry out this mission. Thank you.