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## USPS collection boxes at 3 Henrico post offices broken into



By Tom Lappas, Oct. 5, 2020

United States Post Service officials are investigating after outdoor mail collection boxes at six post offices in the Richmond region – including three in Henrico and one near the Henrico-Richmond border – were broken into sometime between Saturday afternoon and this morning.

The blue metal collection boxes at the Glen Allen (Innsbrook); Lakeside; and Regency locations in Henrico and the Westhampton location near Willow Lawn, just across the county line in Richmond, were tampered with and pried open, according to United States Postal Inspector Michael Romano. Officials don't know how much mail might have been taken from the various locations.

Postal Service officials began receiving calls from the post office employees this morning at about 7 a.m., Romano said.

At the Innsbrook site, officials quickly placed crime tape around the boxes and USPS plastic boxes over the deposit areas while awaiting repairs that Romano said should be completed today.

“Obviously it’s a concern, it’s a concern for us that we’ve got the mailboxes being tampered with,” he said. “It appears in all the cases that the door latch was pried using some sort of tool of force.”

Romano said it was too early to determine whether one person or a coordinated group of people were responsible for all six incidents or whether tampering with ballots from next month's election was the motivation.

Theft of U.S. mail is a federal offense, punishable by as many as five years in federal penitentiary for each count, in addition to any other related charges and convictions that may occur.

If there is any indication that the incidents are connected to attempted voter fraud, USPS officials will work with the FBI to investigate, Romano said.

“This is a serious crime,” he said. “We investigate, aggressively, crimes that involve the U.S. Mail. If and when we locate these individuals, we will prosecute them to the highest degree.”

Anyone who dropped mail in the boxes at the post offices between 3 p.m. Saturday and 7 a.m. this morning should contact a USPS hotline at 877-876-2455 to report it, Romano said. Otherwise, unless the mail included tracking information, officials will not know about it, he said.

That same number is available to receive any tips about who may have tampered with the boxes, Romano said. The USPS typically offers rewards for any information that leads to arrests and convictions in mail-tampering cases, he said.

USPS officials are now reviewing as much information as they can find that’s related to the incidents, Romano said, though he declined to indicate whether any or all of the locations have video surveillance. Officials also are reviewing the security measures in place at post offices the region, he said.

In the meantime, he advised people to mail items from inside a post office rather than in a collection box.

Mail theft and fraud are uncommon, Romano said, although he added that his team investigated several cases of break-ins at collection boxes in the Richmond region in July.

“I am deeply troubled by the reports of mail theft at multiple USPS drop-off boxes across the Richmond area,” U.S. Congressman Donald McEachin said in a statement late Monday afternoon. “Access to these mailboxes is critical during the pandemic as we are all limiting our contact with others and choosing to utilize mailboxes rather than go inside the post office. It is a shame that someone has chosen to compromise this important resource for our communities.”

Henrico Commonwealth's Attorney Shannon Taylor expressed similar sentiments.

“Postal boxes are federal property and I am extremely dismayed and disturbed that they would be broken into,” she said in a statement. “With a month before a critical election, some people are choosing to vote by mail and they must be able to know their vote is safe, will not be tampered with and will arrive in a timely fashion to their local registrar.”

Taylor pledged her support and assistance to federal authorities, should they request it.

Delegate Rodney Willett, who represents the 73rd District in the Virginia House of Delegates, said the incidents were disturbing.

"I am extremely concerned and dismayed at the apparent thievery from mailboxes in the region," Willett said. "Particularly, during this pandemic, people depend on the postal service for goods and services, for legal documents, to receive and pay bills and for communications from distanced loved ones.

"Moreover, with an election a month away and people legitimately fearing infection, many folks are counting on mail-in ballots. Their right to participate in a critical election should not be abrogated by egregious and illegal acts."

Anyone who has submitted an absentee ballot by mail or any other method can check its status by visiting <https://vote.elections.virginia.gov/VoterInformation/Lookup/status>.

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**USPS outdoor collection box break-in locations:**

Glen Allen Post Office, 4990 Sadler Place, Glen Allen 23060

Lakeside Post Office, 2100 East Parham Road, Henrico 23228

Regency Branch Post Office, 2000 Starling Drive, Henrico 23229

Westhampton Post Office, 805 Glenburnie Road, Richmond 23226

Midlothian Post Office, 1201 Sycamore Square Drive, Midlothian 23113

Pocoshock Creek Post Office, 7501 Lady Blair Lane, North Chesterfield 23236