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OFFICE OF INSPECTOR GENERAL UNITED STATES POSTAL SERVIC

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AUDIT REPORT Report Number 22-159-R23 | May 11, 2023

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Highlights

Background

The Postal Service provides customers the ability to track the status of their packages online at USPS.com using the USPS Tracking® website. Examples of messages displayed for customers are "Arrived at USPS Facility", "In Transit to Next Facility", "Departed USPS Facility", or "Out for Delivery". The Postal Service also provides certain tracking definitions on its related *Where is my package?* page on USPS.com.

What We Did

Our objective was to evaluate the effectiveness of the Postal Service's messaging to customers for tracking domestic packages on USPS.com and Informed Delivery. We reviewed tracking messages displayed on USPS.com for 500 judgmentally selected packages, from 25 states, pulled from various points throughout the facilities.

What We Found

The Postal Service could improve customer tracking messaging as it does not always provide reliable information on the status and location of packages. We found that messages for 318 of 500 packages (64 percent) did not accurately reflect the location, time, and/or date of the packages we observed. Messages for 163 packages indicated "Out for Delivery" when they were still at the post office and 46 packages lacked a status message for the facility we observed. Messages for 497 of 500 packages also displayed at least one nondescriptive facility name or location (e.g., "Arrived at USPS Facility").

These issues resulted from a combination of factors including missing package scans, which can occur if a barcode is unreadable, or scans not being completed as required. Also, the Postal Service's programming logic reports anticipated package movement through the network rather than describing the actual package location. In other words, a system-generated message is utilized to identify the next step in a sequence of events. For example, a package's messaging may show "Out for Delivery" or "In Transit", but the package could still be at a facility. Lastly, officials stated that certain locations/facilities are purposely nondescriptive for security-related reasons.

While we recognize the Postal Service's challenges with scanning accuracy and preference for anticipated movement or nondescriptive messaging to address efficiency and operational concerns, clearly defining the status of packages on USPS.com will enhance understanding, transparency, and improve customer experience.

Recommendation

We recommended management develop package status descriptions that explain missing scan events and enhance explanations for messages such as for "Out for Delivery", "In Transit", or nondescriptive facility names on its tracking websites.

Transmittal Letter

OFFICE OF INSPECT	
May 11, 2023	
MEMORANDUM FOR:	MARC D. MCCRERY VICE PRESIDENT, CUSTOMER EXPERIENCE
	GARY C. REBLIN VICE PRESIDENT, INNOVATIVE BUSINESS TECHNOLOGY
	amande of. Staffel
FROM:	Amanda H. Stafford Deputy Assistant Inspector General for Retail, Marketing & Supply Management
SUBJECT:	Audit Report – Package Tracking Messaging (Report Number 22-159-R23)
This report presents the r	esults of our audit of Package Tracking Messaging.
	ration and courtesies provided by your staff. If you have any questions ation, please contact Matthew Miller, Acting Director, Sales, Marketing & 3-248-2100.
Attachment	
cc: Postmaster General Corporate Audit Resp	oonse Management

Results

Introduction/Objective

This report presents the results of our selfinitiated audit of the U.S. Postal Service's Package Tracking Messaging (Project Number 22-159). Our objective was to evaluate the effectiveness of the Postal Service's messaging for tracking domestic packages on USPS.com and Informed Delivery. See Appendix A for additional information about this audit.

Background

The Postal Service provides customers the ability to track the status of their packages online at USPS.com¹ using the USPS Tracking® website. Packages searchable on USPS.com must be affixed with a corresponding barcode tracking number and can include both domestic and international mailings.

The Postal Service also allows residential customers to track the status of their packages using Informed Delivery, a free service from USPS that allows a user to preview images of incoming mail, as well as status updates about packages. Specifically, customers can view the status of their packages on the Informed Delivery dashboard and can also receive USPS Tracking updates for incoming packages via separate email or text notifications. Examples of status messaging displayed to customers are "Arrived at USPS Facility", "In Transit to Next Facility", "Departed USPS Facility", or "Out for Delivery". The Postal Service also provides certain definitions on its related *Where is my package?* page on USPS.com so customers can gain a greater understanding of their package status.

USPS.com and Informed Delivery² messaging is collected throughout the creation, processing, transportation, and delivery of the package from scans of package barcodes performed by equipment, system automated events, or manually by USPS staff using hand-held scanners. As these scans are completed, the Postal Service's Product Tracking and Reporting (PTR) system collects the scan event information for each package. These scan events are converted to message scripts that are displayed in real-time when customers attempt to search the status of their packages on USPS.com and Informed Delivery. Figure 1 shows messages provided on USPS.com such as label creation, acceptance, facility processing, and delivery.

Figure 1: Example of Tracking Information on USPS.com

Source: Example of information presented on package number

observed by U.S. Postal Service Office of Inspector General (OIG) staff on January 24, 2023.



¹ USPS.com or USPS Tracking is a free service the Postal Service offers customers to provide end-to-end tracking of an item. See https://tools.usps.com/go/ TrackConfirmAction_input.

² The messaging contained on Informed Delivery is the same as what is displayed on USPS.com.

We recently reported³ on issues related to confusing messaging for international packages on USPS.com, including missing messages, duplicate messages, imprecise wording, nondescriptive locations, and inconsistent facility labels. We recommended the Postal Service review the business rules governing USPS.com tracking for international packages to promote clear and accurate messages. The Postal Service agreed with our recommendation, stating they will "assess opportunities to refine display rules and update descriptions to provide more consistency and clarity for scans on international packages" and upon completion, "will develop and implement appropriate changes identified during the assessment."⁴ As this prior work focused on international packages, we initiated this follow-up review to determine whether similar issues existed for domestic packages.

The transmittal of data from PTR to USPS.com and Informed Delivery, and the method used to convert the data to messaging for customers, are governed by a set of business rules specific to domestic mail and managed by the Postal Service's Customer Experience group.

Finding #1: Improved Customer Messaging

The Postal Service could improve customer messaging for packages as it does not always provide reliable information on the status and location of packages. We analyzed 500 packages⁵ across 25 states from processing plants and post offices and found unreliable location information and nondescriptive facility details. (See Appendix B for additional information on the package analysis and specific plant and post office locations.)

Specifically, we noted:

Unreliable Messaging Displayed: We found USPS.com messages for 318 of the 500 packages (64 percent) we reviewed did not accurately reflect the location at the time and date of the OIG's observation of those packages (127 at plants and 191 at post offices). We found that more than half of the messages indicated "Out for Delivery" status (163 packages) but were still at the respective facility observed by OIG (see Figure 2 example). Subsequent to our observations, all 163 packages were delivered the same day as the "Out for Delivery" message. However, the possibility exists that a package could generate a message but remain at the facility beyond the date of arrival.

Figure 2: Example of Package Messaging Indicating Package Already Left Post Office Prior to OIG Observation

OIG Observation Details	USPS.com Messaging Excerpt	Accuracy Issue
Facility Type: Post OfficeImage: Constraint of the second	 Out for Delivery JACKSON, MS 39209 November 23, 2022, 8:07 am Arrived at Post Office JACKSON, MS 39209 November 23, 2022, 7:56 am Arrived at USPS Regional Destination Facility JACKSON MS DISTRIBUTION CENTER November 23, 2022, 5:13 am In Transit to Next Facility November 22, 2022 	We observed the package at the Jackson Westland Station on November 23, 2022, at 8:43 a.m.; however, the messaging showed it was "Out for Delivery" at 8:07 a.m.

Source: Comparison of OIG observation and USPS.com messaging.

³ USPS OIG, U.S. Postal Service International Mail Operations and Performance Data, Report Number 21-197-R22 (June 2, 2022).

⁴ The target implementation date is March 31, 2023.

⁵ We judgmentally selected 500 packages from various points throughout these facilities, such as at the arrival areas or docks, right after processing on automation, and those already staged for delivery/transportation.

Figure 3: Example of Package Messaging Not Including Location of OIG Observation

OIG Observation Details	USPS.com Messaging Excerpt	Accuracy Issue
Facility Type: Processing plant	Delivered Delivered, Front Door/Porch AMBLER, PA 19002 September 23, 2022, 4:54 pm	
Facility Name and Location: Manchester Processing and Distribution Center (P&DC), 955 Goffs Falls Rd, Manchester, NH 03103	 Out for Delivery AMBLER, PA 19002 September 23, 2022, 6:18 am Arrived at Post Office AMBLER, PA 19002 September 23, 2022, 6:07 am 	No messages showed the package arrived at the Manchester P&DC, even though the OIG observed the package
Date: September 20, 2022 Time: 9:48 a.m.	• Shipping Label Created, USPS Awaiting Item LYNDEBOROUGH, NH 03082 September 19, 2022, 3:15 pm	at that facility on September 20, 2022.
9.40 U.M.	 Pre-Shipment Info Sent to USPS, USPS Awaiting Item September 19, 2022 	

Source: Comparison of OIG observation and USPS.com messaging.

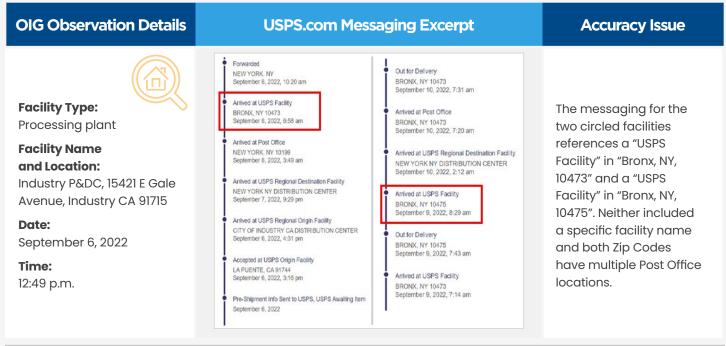
 Further, of the 318 packages with unreliable messages, 46 lacked a status message capturing the facility at which the OIG observed the package – five at post offices and 41 at plants (see Figure 3 example).

To supplement these tests of messaging accuracy, we performed additional analysis for all 500 packages to assess the specificity of the USPS.com messaging. We noted:

 Nondescriptive Facility Names: We found messages for 497 of 500 packages (99 percent) displayed at least one nondescriptive facility name or location – all of which pertained to post offices.⁶ While each of the post offices observed had specific names, only general information on the city, state, and ZIP Code were often displayed in the messaging. For example, Figure 4 shows the messaging stated, "USPS Facility" in "Bronx, NY, 10473" and "USPS Facility" in "Bronx, NY, 10475". Our OIG analysis found two different post offices within the "Bronx, NY 10473" and three different post offices within the "Bronx, NY 10475". Due to the nondescriptive facility names within these two Zip Codes, customers do not have full visibility into the tracking of their package.

⁶ We found USPS.com messaging displayed specific names for each of the processing plants.

Figure 4: Example of Package Messaging Displaying Nondescriptive Facility Names



Source: Comparison of OIG observation and USPS.com messaging.

These collective messaging issues were caused by a combination of factors including scan performance and programming logic as follows:

Scan Performance and Messaging: As operational scans feed the information that eventually gets transmitted into USPS.com messages, any missing scans⁷ would negatively impact message accuracy. Currently, the Postal Service does not provide an explanation as to why package scan events may be missing to customers on USPS.com.

We have issued multiple reports highlighting deficient scanning operations at plants and post offices⁸ to Postal Service officials attributing these shortfalls to a variety of factors including lack of training or awareness of the applicable scanning procedures for staff and, in some cases, staff not following processes. As these prior reports contain open recommendations with pending Postal Service corrective actions, we are not making new recommendations on scan performance in this report. Going forward, it will be important for the Postal Service to successfully implement actions to improve scan completeness and timeliness as it has a direct impact on package tracking messaging accuracy.

Messaging Programming Logic: Postal Service internal processes allow for system-generated scanning events, which create anticipated package movement through the network rather than the actual package location. In other words, when a package barcode is scanned at a post office or plant, a system-generated message is utilized to determine the next step in a sequence of events. For example, although a package's messaging shows "Out for Delivery" or "In Transit to Next Facility", the package could still be at the facility pending additional processing.

7 Missing scans can occur if a barcode is unreadable or scans were not completed as required.

⁸ USPS OIG, U.S. Postal Service International Mail Operations and Performance Data, Report Number 21-197-R22 (June 2, 2022); Mail Delivery, Customer Service, and Property Conditions Review - Select Units, New Jersey District, Report Number 21-170-R23 (December 2, 2022); Efficiency of Operations at the Dominick V. Daniels Processing and Distribution Center, Kearny, NJ, Report Number 21-169-R23 (October 19, 2022); and Mail Delivery, Customer Service, and Property Conditions Review -Select Units, St. Louis, MO Region, Report Number 22-115-R22 (August 31, 2022).

⁶⁶On USPS.com, the Postal Service does not currently provide a description of an "Out for Delivery" scan or a full description of what encompasses an "In Transit to Next Facility" event.⁹⁹

Other package carriers also utilize systemgenerated scanning events; however, these events are clearly defined to customers on their websites. On USPS.com, the Postal Service does not currently provide a description of an "Out for Delivery" scan or a full description of what encompasses an "In Transit to Next Facility" event. The Postal Service stated an "In Transit" event is when an "Item is being processed or transported to the delivering post office facility."

 Security Issue: Postal Service officials stated that certain locations/facilities are purposely nondescriptive to protect the safety of Postal Service employees from potential harm or theft.

⁶⁶Clearly defining the status of packages for customers on USPS.com will enhance understanding and transparency and improve the overall customer experience.⁹⁹

In 2019, Postal Service officials stated they conducted a study among cross-functional groups, including Operations and Information Technology, which resulted in it adopting industry standards for anticipated movement messaging when a package scan is not obtained. For example, when a package arrives at a local delivery unit, after the package is scanned by an employee as "Arrived at USPS Facility", an automated message stating "Out for Delivery" is system-generated shortly thereafter. This provides a customer with at least some visibility, even if it is not an accurate reflection of the status of the customer's package.

While we recognize the Postal Service's challenges with scanning accuracy and preference for anticipated movement or nondescriptive messaging to address efficiency and operational concerns, clearly defining the status of packages for customers on USPS.com will enhance understanding and transparency and improve the overall customer experience. As customer expectations of package tracking continue to evolve, such confusing and nondescriptive messaging on USPS.com without explanation can negatively impact customers' perceptions of the Postal Service and their brand.

Recommendation #1

We recommend the Vice President, Innovative Business Technology, in coordination with the Vice President, Customer Experience, develop package status descriptions that explain missing package scan events and enhance explanations for messages such as "Out for Delivery", "In Transit", or nondescriptive facility names on its tracking websites.

Management's Comments

Management partially agreed with the finding and recommendation. Regarding the finding, management did not agree that messaging is unreliable and facility names are vague. Management stated that event messaging is informative, reflects statuses similar to major carriers in the industry, and provides city, state, and ZIP Code

information when most major carriers provide only city and state.

Regarding recommendation 1, management agreed to enhance explanations for messages such as "Out for Delivery" and "In Transit" by adding event descriptions to the Frequently Asked Questions article "Where's my Package"

in a location accessible to customers. The target implementation date is September 30, 2023. However, management disagreed with other parts of the recommendation, including the development of status descriptions that explain missing scans on the USPS Tracking® website and the enhancement of nondescriptive facility names on its tracking website. See Appendix C for management's comments in their entirety.

Evaluation of Management's Comments

The OIG considers management's comments responsive to the recommendation and the planned enhanced explanations for the "Out for Delivery" and "In Transit" messages will help resolve some of the issues identified in the report. In addition, the planned tracking website enhancements may address the other issues identified around the messaging for missing scan events and the enhancement of nondescriptive facility names. We will continue to review the Postal Service's enhanced messaging to ensure transparency over package tracking and improvements to the overall customer experience.

All recommendations require OIG concurrence before closure. Consequently, the OIG requests written confirmation when corrective actions are completed. Recommendations should not be closed in the Postal Service's follow-up tracking system until the OIG provides written confirmation that the recommendations can be closed.

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Scope and Methodology

Our objective was to evaluate the effectiveness of the Postal Service's messaging for tracking domestic packages on USPS.com and Informed Delivery. To accomplish our objective, we:

- Conducted observations at processing plants and post office across 25 states. During these site visits we judgmentally selected 500 packages for further analysis. (See Appendix B for additional details and locations attended.)
- Analyzed judgmentally selected packages to review the corresponding USPS.com and Informed Delivery website messaging and tracking information.
- Reviewed Postal Service policies, directives, and/ or guidance for developing customer-facing tracking and messaging information on USPS.com and Informed Delivery.
- Reviewed Postal Service social media platforms

 Twitter, Facebook, Instagram to capture customer insights on the quality of USPS.com and Informed Delivery messaging.
- Reviewed Postal Service's Customer 360 data to learn about instances where customers raised issues/concerns about the USPS.com or Informed Delivery messaging.
- Interviewed Postal Service headquarters officials regarding policies, directives, and/or guidance for developing customer facing tracking and messaging information.

- Reviewed prior audit work from the U.S.
 Postal Service Office of Inspector General, the Government Accountability Office, and other government agencies related to the subject matter.
- Reviewed leading practices related to package tracking and messaging (including building on research from our prior international project⁹).

We conducted this performance audit from August 2022 through May 2023 in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards and included such tests of internal controls as we considered necessary under the circumstances. Those standards require that we plan and perform the audit to obtain sufficient, appropriate evidence to provide a reasonable basis for our finding and conclusions based on our audit objective. We believe that the evidence obtained provides a reasonable basis for our finding and conclusions based on our audit objective. We discussed our observations and conclusions with management on April 5, 2023, and included their comments where appropriate.

We assessed the reliability of Product Tracking and Reporting, Informed Delivery, USPS.com, and Customer 360 systems when performing our data analysis. We assessed the reliability of the computergenerated data by interviewing agency officials knowledgeable about the data and reviewing related documentation. We determined that the data were sufficiently reliable for the purposes of this report.

9 USPS OIG, U.S. Postal Service International Mail Operations and Performance Data, Report Number 21-197-R22 (June 2, 2022).

Prior Audit Coverage

Report Title	Objective	Report Number	Final Report Date	Monetary Impact
Mail Delivery, Customer Service, and Property Conditions Review – Select Units, New Jersey District	Evaluate mail delivery, customer service, and property conditions at the Belleville Annex, Kearny Main Post Office, and the Union Post Office in the New Jersey District.	22-170-R23	December 2, 2022	\$O
Efficiency of Operations at the Dominick V. Daniels P&DC, Kearny, NJ	Evaluate the efficiency of operations at the DV Daniels P&DC.	22-169-R23	October 19, 2022	\$O
Mail Delivery, Customer Service, and Property Conditions Review – Select Units, St. Louis, MO Region	Evaluate mail delivery, customer service, and property conditions at the Saint Peters Main Post Office; and the Maryville Gardens, Chouteau, and Marian Oldham Stations in the St. Louis, MO region.	22-115-R22	August 31, 2022	\$0
U.S. Postal Service International Mail Operations and Performance Data	Assess the Postal Service's international mail operations and performance data.	21-197-R22	June 2, 2022	\$O

Appendix B: Package Analysis

We conducted site observations at processing plants and post offices across 25 states between August 2022 and January 2023 (see Table 1 for specific locations visited). During those visits, 500 packages were judgmentally selected from various points throughout these facilities. OIG staff took pictures of the identification barcode for each package and recorded key attribute data including the facility attended, barcode tracking number, and the observation date.

Table 1: Site Observation Locations

	State	Postal Unit/ Delivery Unit City	Postal Unit/Delivery Unit Name	Processing Plant City	Processing Plant Name	
1	CA	Ontario	Ontario Post Office	Industry	Industry P&DC	
2	CO	Aurora	Aurora Main Post Office	Denver	Denver P&DC	
3	FL	Tampa	Town N Country Post Office	Tampa	Ybor City LDC*	
4	GA	Atlanta	Old National Post Office	Atlanta	Atlanta P&DC	
5	IL	Westchester	Westchester Post Office	Carol Stream	Carol Stream P&DC	
6	KY	Lexington	Beaumont Post Office	Lexington	Lexington P&DC	
7	MA	Taunton	Taunton Post Office	Brockton	Brockton P&DC	
8	MD	Monrovia	Monrovia Main Post Office	Capitol Heights	Southern Maryland P&DC	
9	MI	Kalamazoo	Westwood Branch Post Office	Kalamazoo	Kalamazoo P&DC	
10	MN	Minneapolis	Minneapolis Main Post Office	Eagan	Minneapolis Saint Paul NDC**	
11	MO	St. Charles	St. Charles South Post Office	St. Louis	uis St. Louis P&DC	
12	MS	Jackson	Jackson Westlake Post Office	Jackson	Jackson P&DC	
13	MT	Missoula	Mullan (Mansfield) Post Office	Missoula	Missoula P&DC	
14	NC	Durham	Research Triangle Park Post Office	Raleigh	Raleigh P&DC	
15	NE	Omaha	Elmwood Park Post Office	Omaha	Omaha P&DC	
16	NH	Plaistow	Plaistow Main Post Office	Manchester	Manchester P&DC	
17	NJ	Union	Union Post Office	Kearny	DVD-Kearny P&DC	
18	NM	Las Cruces	Mesilla Park Post Office	El Paso, TX	El Paso (TX) P&DC***	
19	OK	Tulsa	Sheridan Tulsa Post Office	Tulsa	Tulsa P&DC	
20	PA	Reading	Reading Main Post Office	Bethlehem	Lehigh Valley P&DC	
21	ТХ	Richardson	Richardson Main Post Office	Coppell	North Texas P&DC	
22	VA	Sterling	Potomac Falls Post Office	Merrifield	Merrifield P&DC	
23	WA	Spokane	Sunset Hill Post Office	Spokane	Spokane P&DC	
24	WI	Milwaukee	Greenfield Post Office	Milwaukee	Milwaukee P&DC	
25	WY	Cheyenne	Cheyenne Capital Post Office	Cheyenne	Cheyenne P&DC	

*LDC = Logistics & Distribution Center

**NDC = Network Distribution Center

***The Truth or Consequences NM P&DC was closed and the El Paso TX P&DC was processing the mail for this area.

Source: OIG conducted site observation locations.

We then entered the individual package tracking numbers into USPS.com and reviewed the resulting messaging displayed.¹⁰ We evaluated the quality of the Postal Service's messaging provided to customers when they track their packages on USPS.com and Informed Delivery. We analyzed the USPS.com messaging using the following tests to determine the extent to which:

 Accuracy: The USPS.com messaging accurately reflected the date, time, and location of our observation.

- Completeness: USPS.com messaging showed certain events (e.g., arrival or departure).
- Specificity: USPS.com messaging showed specific facility names. We also compared the information gathered from USPS.com to corresponding data in Product Tracking and Reporting (PTR) to determine if facility/locations on USPS.com aligned with those in PTR.
- Duplication: USPS.com messaging showed duplicate events.
- Sequence: Scan events appeared to occur in a sequential order.

¹⁰ To allow for scanning and processing updates, we waited at least seven days before querying and analyzing the accompanying USPS.com data for each package.

Appendix C: Management's Comments



May 1, 2023

JOHN CIHOTA DIRECTOR, AUDIT SERVICES

SUBJECT: Management Response: Package Tracking Messaging (Report Number 22-159-DRAFT)

Thank you for providing the Postal Service with an opportunity to review and comment on the finding and recommendation contained in the draft audit report, Package Tracking Messaging 22-159-DRAFT.

Management partially agrees with the finding and recommendation.

Finding [1]: Improved Customer Messaging

The Postal Service could improve customer messaging for packages as it does not always provide reliable information on the status and location of packages. We analyzed 500 packages7 across 25 states from processing plants and post offices and found unreliable location information and nondescriptive facility details. (See Appendix B for additional information on the package analysis and specific plant and post office locations.)

Management Response:

Management disagrees with statements that messaging is unreliable and facility names are vague. USPS events and messaging are informative and reflect statuses similar to major carriers in the industry. In addition, USPS provides City, State, and ZIP Code location information for status messages. Most major carriers in the industry provide only city and state location information.

Recommendation [1]:

We recommend the Vice President, Innovative Business Technology, in coordination with **the** Vice President, Customer Experience, develop package status descriptions that explain missing package scan events and enhance explanations for messages such as "Out for Delivery", "In Transit", or nondescriptive facility names on its tracking website.

Management Response/Action Plan:

Management partially agrees with the recommendation to enhance explanations for messages such as "Out for Delivery," and "In Transit" and will do so by adding event descriptions to the Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) article "Where's my Package." This action will provide the meaning of statuses for tracking events in a location accessible to consumers.

Management disagrees with the recommendation to develop status descriptions that explain missing scans on the USPS Tracking® website. Recent enhancements to the USPS Tracking website and status categories provide customers the major progress points expected in the package delivery journey.

Finally, Management does not agree with the recommendation to enhance nondescriptive facility names on its tracking website. USPS events and messaging are informative and reflect statuses similar to major carriers in the industry. In addition, USPS provides City, State, and ZIP Code location information for status messages. Most major carriers in the industry provide only city and state location information.

Target Implementation Date: September 30, 2023

<u>Responsible Official:</u> Director, Mail and Package Information Systems

E-SIGNED by Gary.C Reblin on 2023-05-02 07:33:33 CDT

Gary C. Reblin Vice President, Innovative Business Technology

E-SIGNED by Marc.D Mccrery on 2023-05-02 11:02:45 CDT

Marc D. McCrery Vice President, Customer Experience

cc: Corporate Audit & Response Management

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Contact us via our Hotline and FOIA forms. Follow us on social networks. Stay informed.

1735 North Lynn Street, Arlington, VA 22209–2020 (703) 248–2100

For media inquiries, please email press@uspsoig.gov or call (703) 248-2100