



STATEMENT OF
BALTIMORE EXECUTIVE POSTMASTER (A)
ERIC D. GILBERT
before the
House Committee on Oversight and Reform
Subcommittee on Government Operations
Field Hearing: "Waiting on the Mail: Postal Service Standard
Drops in Baltimore and the Surrounding Area"
February 14, 2022

Good morning Chairman Connolly, Ranking Member Hice, members of the subcommittee and Maryland delegation. Thank you for calling this important hearing to examine service performance in Baltimore. We recognize that your constituents depend on the Postal Service for timely and reliable service and we are committed to service excellence.

My name is Eric Gilbert and I currently serve as Acting Executive Postmaster of Baltimore, where I oversee nearly 1,800 employees, working at 34 retail and delivery facilities, with 911 city delivery, 37 rural delivery and 32 collection routes. My postal career began 26 years ago as a mail processing clerk in San Diego, California, and I have held several leadership positions in field operations, mostly in the California 6 (former San Diego) District, where my permanent position is Manager Post Office Operations.

Before assuming this assignment on October 1, 2021, I served on several concurrent detail assignments including Manager, Operations Programs Support & Plant Manager of the Moreno Valley Processing and Distribution Center (P&DC.) I also served as Officer-In-Charge, Riverside, CA, and on detail assignments as the Executive Postmaster of San Diego and Baltimore from March to October 2020.

In the four months that I have been in this position, I have taken actions to improve service performance and efficiencies and I remain committed to continuous improvement of customer service in the City of Baltimore.

OIG Audit of Mail Delivery and Customer Service Operations

As members of the Maryland congressional delegation are aware, the U.S. Postal Service Office of Inspector General (OIG) released its findings in an audit of select Baltimore retail and delivery units on November 4, 2021. The audit included findings of delayed mail, inaccurate reporting of mail conditions, and improper scanning. Maryland District management agreed with the OIG's findings and has worked with Baltimore City leadership to implement processes to satisfy the recommendations, including:

- Holding weekly complement meetings since November 2021 to discuss and review employee availability.
- Weekly reviews of zero workhour report, resulting in actions taken to either force employee return to work or removal from rolls.
- Daily virtual gemba walks to review mail conditions and validate volume entries in our Customer Service Daily Reporting System (CSDRS) and Delivery Conditions Visualization (DCV) tools.

- Conduct daily oversight with boots on the ground site reviews in at risk units identified by the audit.

The OIG audit also identified gaps in daily reporting that the district and Baltimore leadership immediately addressed in order to improve service. We continue to engage in these activities and ensure processes are in place to mitigate any future service disruption.

Factors Impacting Service Performance

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a significant effect on Baltimore postal operations since March 2020. In addition to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, the primary factors contributing to Baltimore's service performance challenges relate to employee complement, availability, and training. We currently have 102 clerk and carrier vacancies, and pandemic-related leave and other employee availability issues have hampered the ability to achieve and maintain service excellence. Nevertheless, we have seen recent service performance improvement as a result of processes I have put in place with the support of our district and area leadership teams.

Employee Availability

As in other parts of the country, Baltimore City offices continue to experience staffing shortages related to the COVID-19 pandemic. The lack of employee availability has led to inconsistent delivery service across the city and its suburbs. The *Families First Coronavirus Response Act* and *Emergency Family Medical Leave Act* of 2020 provided postal employees with up to 80 hours of Emergency Paid Sick Leave (EPSL), as well as expanded FMLA benefits to allow employees to take up to 12 weeks of leave for qualifying reasons from April 1, 2020, through December 31, 2020. The Postal Service fully supported use of these benefits, and Baltimore employees used 65,174 hours of related leave, which equates to 8,146 lost workdays, impacting our 2020 holiday Peak season.

More recently, the *American Rescue Plan Act of 2021* provided postal employees with up to 600 hours Emergency Federal Employee Leave (EFEL) in response to the ongoing pandemic. The law was enacted with the understandable consequence that employee availability would be affected, particularly for federal agencies. At the time the benefit expired, the City of Baltimore had used 52,707 hours, which equates to 6,588 lost workdays.

Under federal law and our collective bargaining agreements, positions held by those on leave are reserved for the eventual return of absent employees, and limits on the size of our workforce mean that the necessary work must be absorbed by the remaining employees. Periods of high

employee absences impact operations as managers and supervisors work to balance available employee workhours with operational demands.

We have seen an improvement in attendance since the expiration of the EFEL benefit, though availability has remained fluid with the evolution of COVID variants. To address availability, our District Operations Integration Manager hosts daily district-wide teleconferences where key metrics are discussed. During these teleconferences, action plans are developed and implemented to include moving resources where needed.

I also review staffing variances weekly for the city and, if necessary, ask for assistance from district offices outside of the City of Baltimore for units falling below the authorized complement threshold to ensure service to customers. Our weekly cadence reviews are down to employee level and include weekly review of employees that do not have any work hours for the past four weeks to determine the root cause of their high absences.

Retaining an Appropriate Employee Complement

When I returned to Baltimore in 2021, I found that our ability to recruit and hire new employees was hindered by delays in removing city carrier assistants (CCAs) and rural carrier associates (RCAs) who are no longer with the organization from our employment rolls and in ensuring that the rolls are accurate. These are non-career representatives of our workforce who perform the same duties as our career carriers. To address this oversight, I hold weekly complement teleconferences with district management and my own leadership team to discuss removals and approved staffing at the individual unit level.

We have also had trouble retaining carriers in the Baltimore region, with many leaving the job after realizing it is much more physically demanding than they anticipated. Our Complement Coordinator works with the lead manager of Customer Service Operations to gain insights from those potential future career carriers who have expressed thoughts of resignation. We conduct one-on-one interviews with the employees to determine what factors led to their desire to leave and what changes could be made to encourage them to stay with the organization. Hiring and recruiting is additionally difficult for high crime areas, and when we place new hires in those units, they often resign if we cannot grant their request to be changed to a different office.

The chart below compares how many CCAs are hired every two weeks beginning the week of September 25 through January 28 to the number of CCA's that are showing on the rolls with a percentage trend line indicating the percent rate of the total hired versus still working. (Example: Pay Period 25 – 54 Hired, 41 are still working, 75.9 percent of the CCA's hired have been retained.)



As we are continually hiring, we have expedited the process by automating the posting of vacancies every four days to ensure there is always an available requisition. We have 21 CCA and RCA future hires pending.

Employee Development

As the OIG identified, Baltimore management was only able to train a limited number of new carriers at a time due to capacity restrictions. Prior to May 2021, the region only had one training academy that could accommodate seven new carriers a week.

To address this shortcoming, the Maryland District opened a new city carrier training academy at Nottingham Station on November 29, 2021. This facility supplements the driver training course at the Baltimore Incoming Mail Facility, reducing the time between a carrier's initial hiring and training. Together these two facilities can train as many as 32 carriers each week.

The expedited hiring process described above has also resulted in challenges during the onboarding process due to an insufficient number of trained driver safety and on-the-job instructors. The lack of sufficient instructors increases the number of new hires pending

training. I engaged in a recruitment campaign among current employees to increase the number of certified on-the-job instructors.

We are additionally engaged in ongoing training measures to improve deficiencies found in the OIG's audit, such as lack of scanning compliance. To improve understanding of the various scanning tools and data, weekly training is provided to all district supervisory employees, with recordings available for those unable to attend. Supervisors, managers and postmasters are in turn required to train carriers and clerks. I monitor package scanning and handling reports daily. These are shared with delivery units and supervisors each day, and Customer Service Operations Managers conduct any necessary corrective actions. I require my leadership team to certify that information has been shared with subordinate employees

Management Actions to Improve Service

As mentioned previously, since returning to this assignment in October 2021, I have focused on employee availability and hiring as well as daily service reviews of first and last mile and overall scanning performance. Beyond the actions implemented in response to the OIG's recommendations, I have taken the following steps to improve efficiencies and service:

- New employees pending official training are provided local unit modified training on how to sort and separate mail to ensure the advancement of "cased" mail takes place in an effort to move the mail in at risk units to avoid high volumes of delayed mail.
- New employees pending training through the carrier academy who have passed the drivers training course are provided local unit modified training on how to use the scanner, and the perfect package delivery process is utilized to complete parcel deliveries in our at-risk offices.
- I monitor national tools, including the non-delivery indicator report, triangulation report (a daily service and performance report card) and Chief Retail and Delivery Office mail rotational dashboard daily. When these reports indicate we are not meeting the required minimum thresholds, I review and discuss the impacts down to the unit level and initiate our recovery plan.

Peak Season Planning and Success

In preparation for the 2021 holidays, the Postal Service carefully studied the 2020 season to identify specific actions to improve service. Contending with the COVID-19 pandemic, the 2020 holiday season was impacted by dramatic increases in package volume that outstripped our processing capacity, staffing shortages, and disrupted and unreliable transportation networks.

Nationally, to prepare for 2021, we focused on adding employees, expanding our package processing capabilities, and strengthening our transportation networks. Recognizing the 2020 staffing shortages, we set a national goal to hire 40,000 additional employees, and we conducted hiring events, often weekly, in many locations around the country. To improve employee retention, we converted more than 33,000 pre-career employees to career status before peak season.

In the City of Baltimore, between October and December 2021, we hired 267 total employees, including 231 CCAs, 23 holiday clerk assistants, 7 PSEs, and 6 RCAs.

Nationally, to improve the flow of mail into and out of our facilities, the organization leased annexes to acquire more than 4 million square feet of additional space across 70 processing, logistics, and delivery annexes. We procured 112 package sorters to expedite increased package volumes, enabling us to process 4.5 million additional packages each day. We also added air carriers to our air transportation network, emphasized reliability among our surface transportation providers, and expanded the surface transfer center network to increase long-haul transportation utilization and mitigate potential driver shortages.

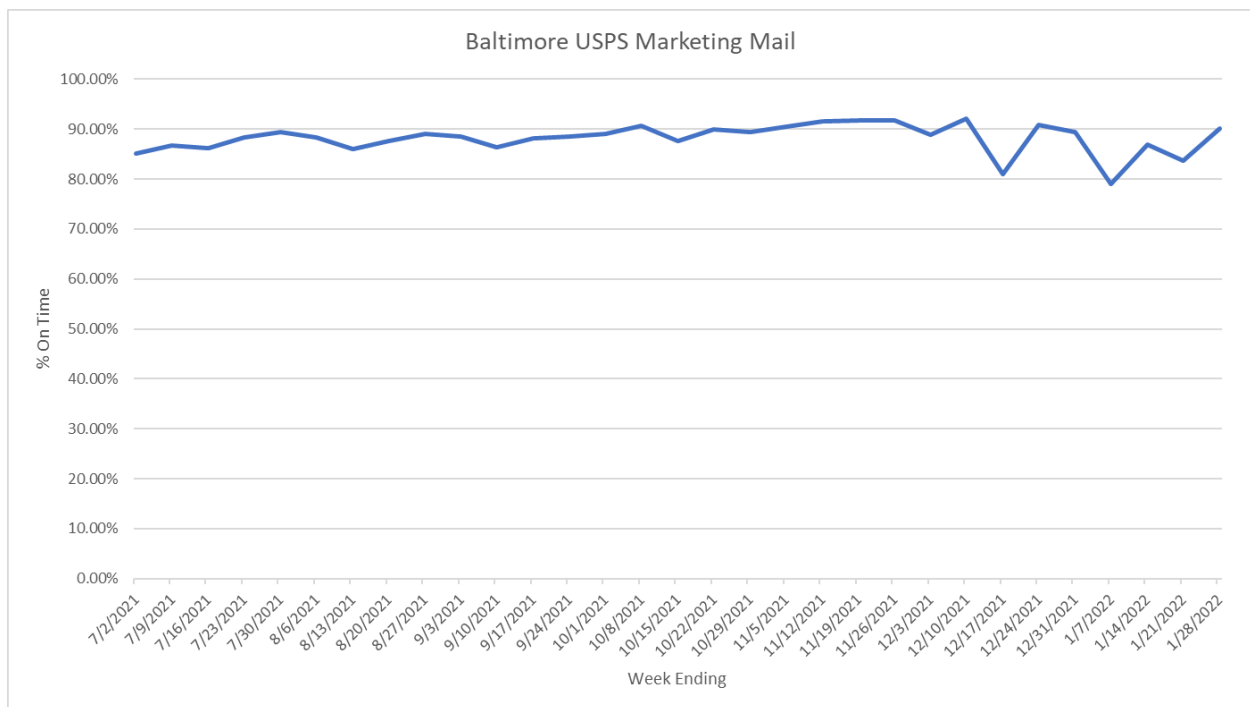
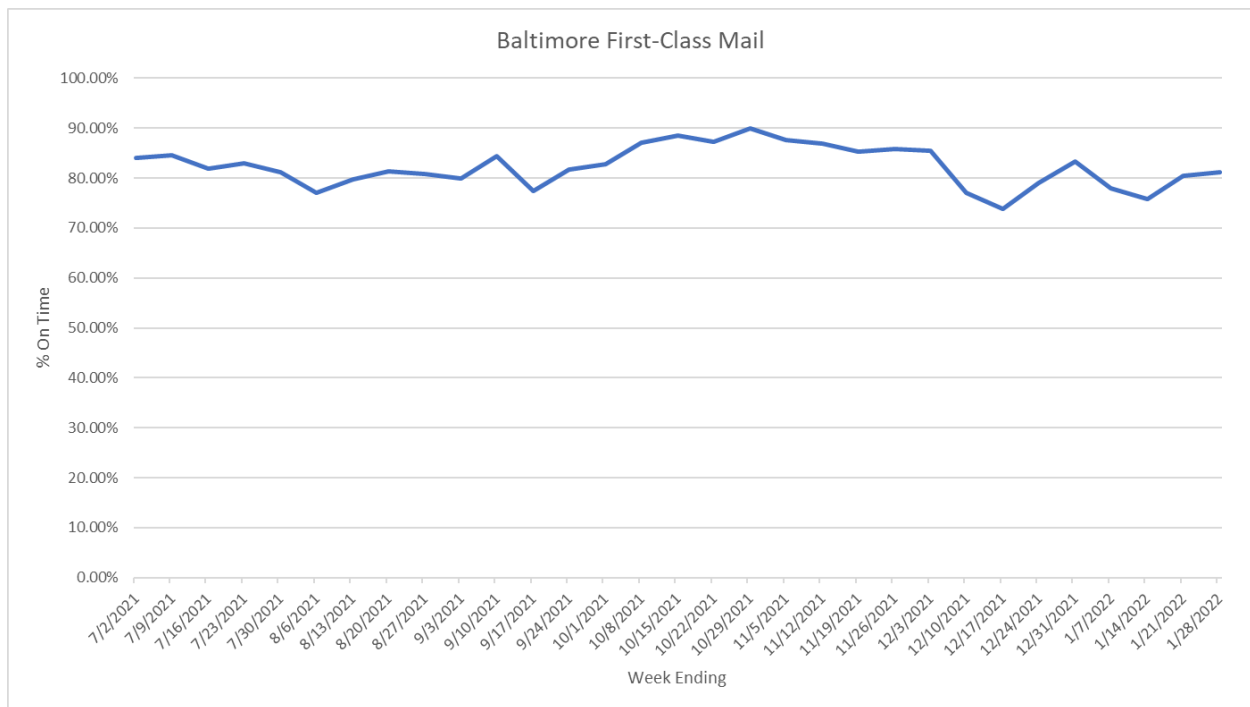
In Maryland specifically, we leased additional space in Baltimore and Forestville for Package Sorting Annexes and added six package sorting machines to increase processing capacity. We also established six added delivery annexes with more than 250 employees. Five of these annexes were in the City of Baltimore and we began moving package volume to those sites on November 6 to be run separately from normal delivery operations.

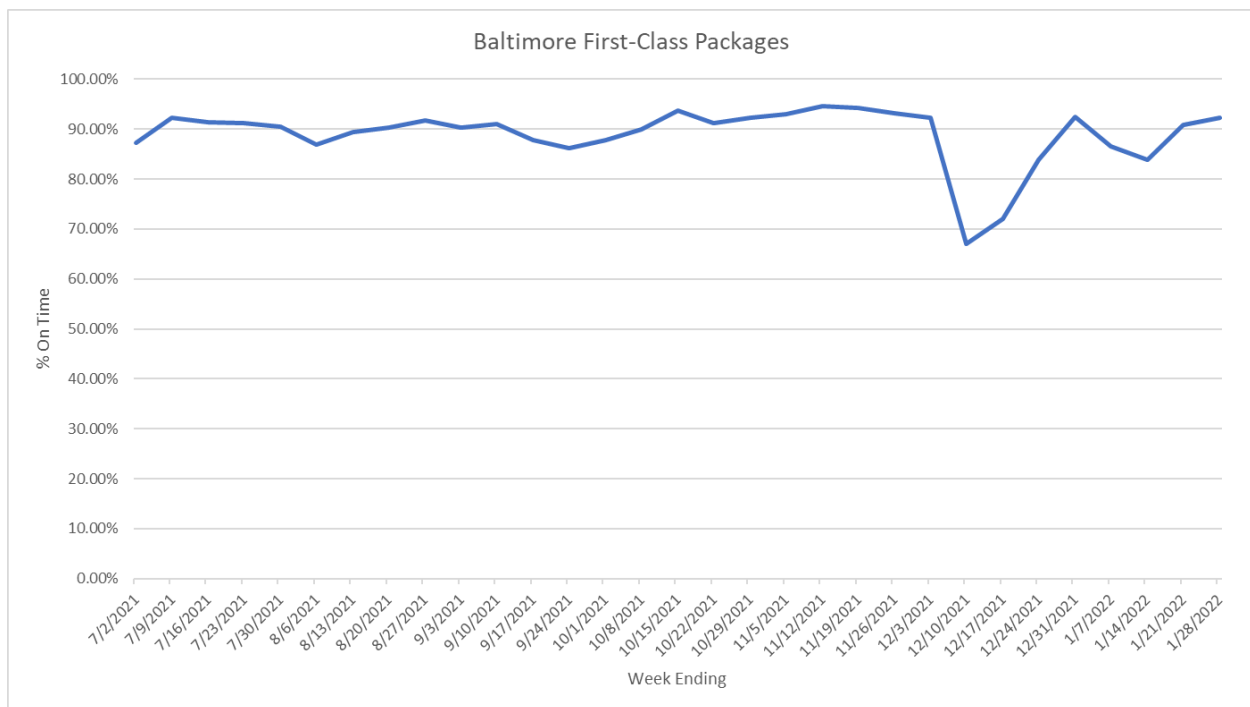
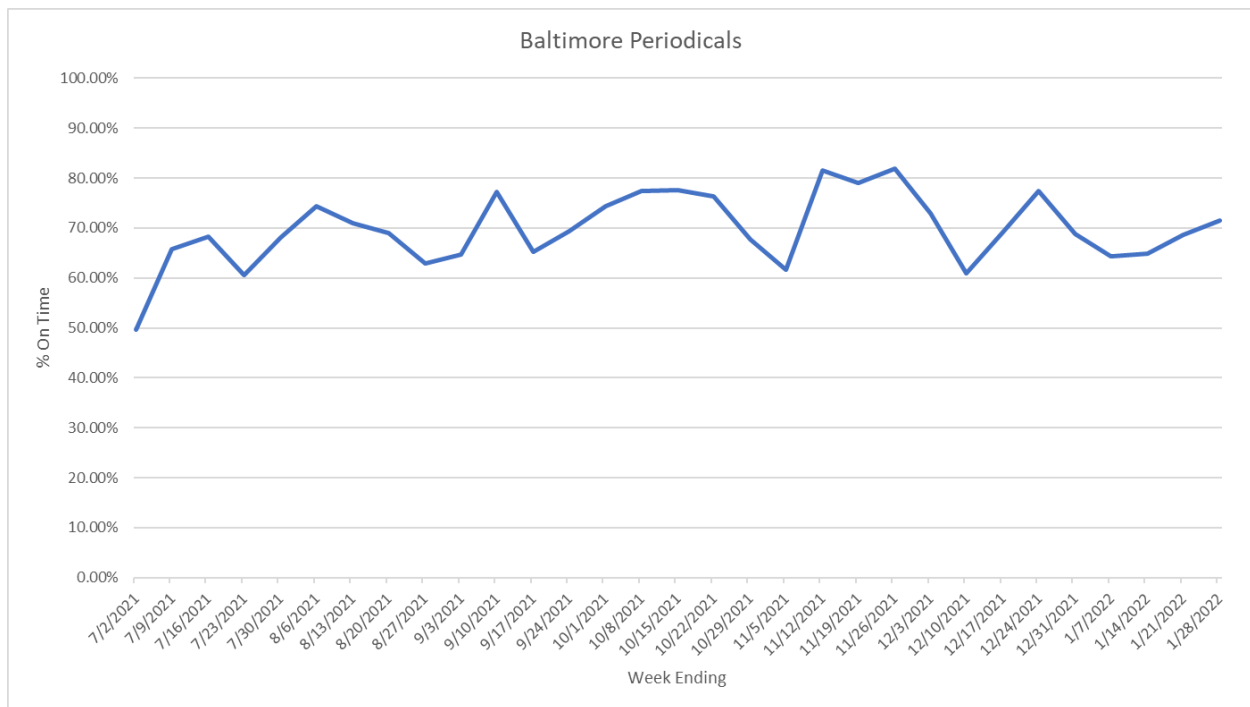
While I do not oversee plant operations, these annexes allowed us to provide more consistent mail and package delivery for customers by alleviating space constraints in our regular delivery units, improving package sortation, and providing more flexibility. In addition, we conducted 6:00 to 9:00 a.m. package delivery runs in all Baltimore City delivery units to ensure timely package delivery and early carrier return.

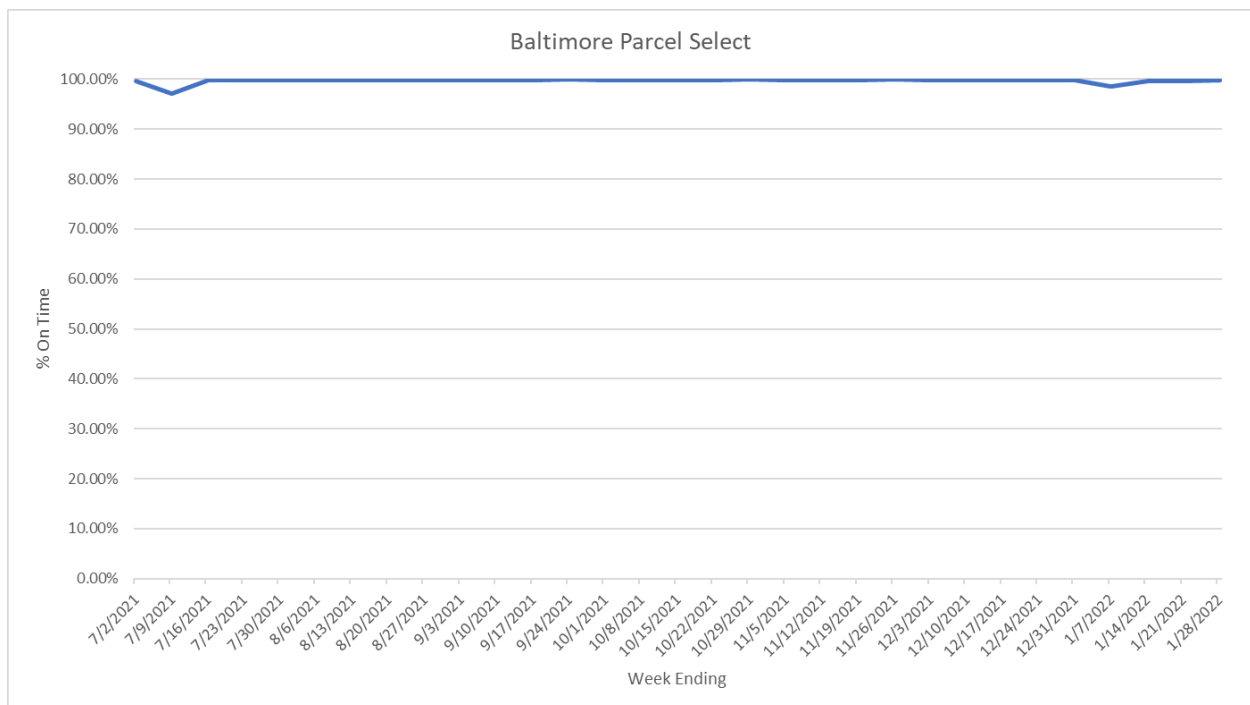
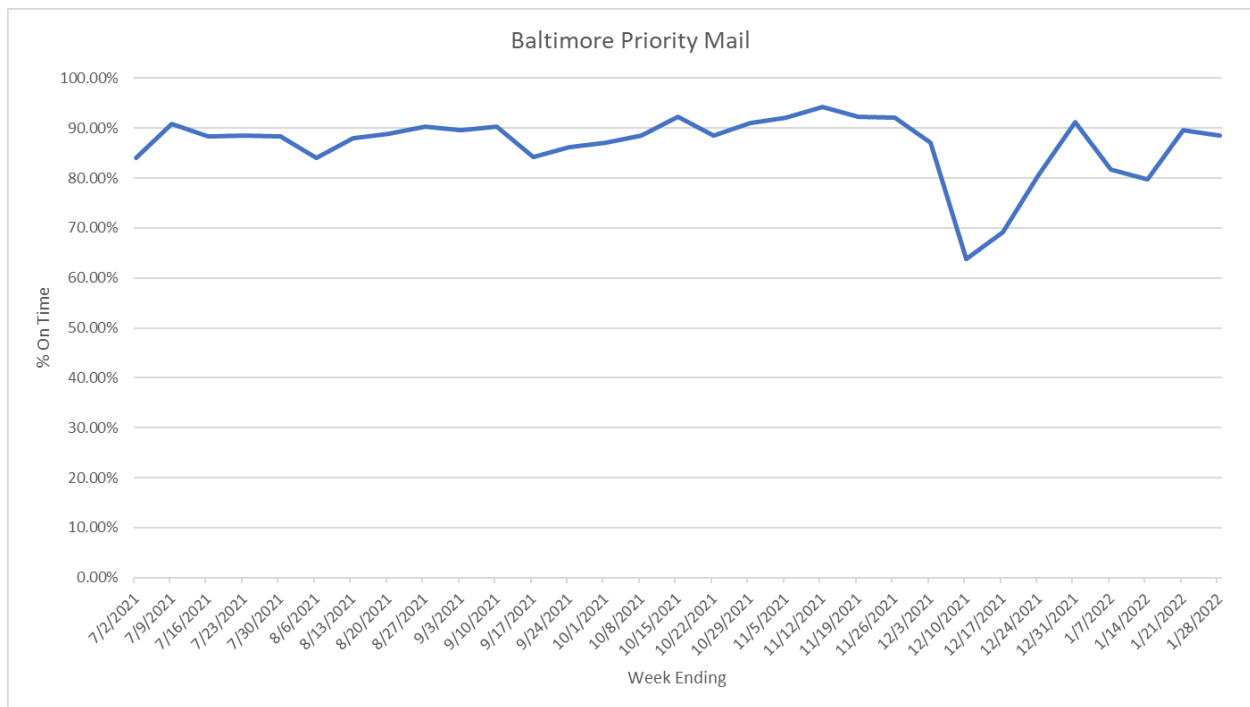
As a result of this organization-wide focus on improving performance, the Postal Service accepted more than 13.2 billion mailpieces and packages this holiday season with an average delivery time of less than three days. In Baltimore we delivered 2.48 million packages over the 35-day peak season period of November 28 through December 24.

Overall Service Improvements

Data trends illustrated below for the former Baltimore District (the City of Baltimore and surrounding suburbs) from July 2021 through January 2022 demonstrate that service has stabilized across all product areas since the OIG completed its review of service performance. While there were dips in the on-time delivery performance rates in early December, due to employee absences resulting from the emerging Omicron variant, and in early January, due to winter weather, service has since rebounded and stabilized.







* Parcel Select is the Postal Service's economical ground delivery service for packages entered in bulk, including those entered at destination facilities (last mile delivery).

Conclusion

While I have only recently returned to serve the City of Baltimore, please know I am committed to providing high quality, reliable service to our residents. As noted above, I have focused on employee availability and training, and leveraged internal dashboards and reporting tools to improve service. Our peak season efforts resulted in great success and we have seen steady service performance improvement as a result of the processes we have established. We stand ready to refine those processes as any new challenges arise.

Thank you, Chairman Connolly, Ranking Member Hice and members of the subcommittee for the opportunity to submit this testimony. I welcome any questions that you or members of the Maryland delegation have.