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From the Los Angeles Times

Post office says threatening dogs force it to halt service

Residents of a cul-de-sac in Hawthorne had to install curbside mailboxes or collect their mail at the post office. A large dog cornered a mail carrier there, and a Chihuahua regularly barks at her.
By Alexandra Zavis

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The clash between letter carriers and man's best friend is the butt of many jokes. But for one block in Hawthorne, it is no laughing matter.

The U.S. Postal Service is refusing to deliver mail to residents' front doors in a cul-de-sac on 134th Place at Doty Avenue, where it says aggressive dogs, including a boxer mix and a Chihuahua, are putting its employees at risk.

"This is the biggest threat they face out there," said Larry Dozier, a postal service spokesman for the Los Angeles area. "We cannot let a carrier into a situation which is unsafe or the carrier feels threatened."

Deliveries to 18 homes were suspended after a large dog of undetermined breed cornered a carrier Oct. 7, Dozier said. The employee was not bitten, but Dozier said it was the latest in a string of such incidents on the street.

Residents have been asked to install curbside mailboxes so that carriers do not have to get out of their vehicles. But some residents complain the boxes are expensive, can easily be broken into and are inconvenient for the elderly and disabled.

"It's a shame that we are all punished," said Josette Pople, 80.

Until Monday, those who did not have a curbside box could collect their mail from the post office. But their mail will now be returned to the sender, Dozier said. The only alternatives are to rent a post office box or submit a change of address form and have their mail delivered elsewhere.

About 4.7 million Americans are bitten by dogs every year, and about 12 of them die of the bites, according to the American Veterinary Medical Assn. The most frequent victims are small children, the elderly and letter carriers, in that order.

More than 3,000 carriers nationwide were bitten in 2007, including 73 in the Los Angeles area, one of the highest numbers in the country, according to the postal service.

"While some of the attacks are minor, others have led to reconstructive surgery," Dozier said.

From the safety of her van, mail carrier Debbie Abrams dropped off letters Tuesday to the handful of 134th Place residents who had installed curbside boxes. She told a Times photographer that she has two children to feed and cannot afford an injury like the one suffered by a colleague, whose hand was bitten on another street. That carrier can no longer button her children's clothes, Abrams said.

Residents were sympathetic about Abrams' Oct. 7 encounter, which they said had involved a large boxer mix. But they said the only other dog that had confronted Abrams was a Chihuahua, which regularly barks at her.

The mail carrier "is making a big thing out of nothing," Pople said.

Abrams did not go into detail about why she felt threatened. But Dozier said, "small dogs have teeth and they will bite."

He said the postal service will normally contact the owner of a potentially threatening dog and ask that they confine the animal. If the owner refuses, their service could be suspended. In this case, he said, there had been numerous incidents of unleashed and threatening dogs, which left the department no choice but to suspend service to the entire block.

"We've talked, we've sent letters back and forth. For whatever reason, in their cul-de-sac, we have been unable to control those dogs," he said. "The carrier feels unsafe. She doesn't know where the dogs are going to be coming from."

Residents disputed that dogs were running loose in the street.

"I been here since 1985," said Josefina Bautista. "I don't see stray dogs, only cats."

Bautista, who at 78 suffers from severe arthritis and uses a walker, grudgingly installed a letter box in front of her home for just over $50. But she said walking that far "really, really hurts," so she must wait for her grandson to collect the mail. She worries that thieves could get to her letters first.

Many of the cul-de-sac's residents are retired and receive medicines and retirement checks through the mail.

"It is safer when they deliver our mail to our house," Bautista said.

Pople has also installed a box in front of her home, but wondered, "if someone goes and parks in front of it, is she doing to deliver? I don't know."

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Times photographer Allen J. Schaben contributed to this report.

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