



# **Committee on Post Office Closings & Consolidations**

**National Association of Postmasters of the United States**

Testimony of

Lyle Puppe

Retired Postmaster of Cottage Grove, MN

Before the

**Postal Regulatory Commission**

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Mr. Chairman and distinguished Commission members, my name is Lyle Puppe and I am the Retired Postmaster of Cottage Grove, Minnesota. I am testifying at your invitation, at the request of Halma Mayor Shane Olson. Mayor Olson would have appreciated the opportunity to appear here today; however he was unable to attend. With your permission, I would like to submit a letter from him for the hearing record.

Halma is located in the northwest corner of Minnesota, about twenty-five miles south of the Canadian border. Eighty American citizens live in the town, which supports eight businesses. One of Halma's past mayors is its former Postmaster. Indeed, the town and the post office are intertwined. Halma needs a universal Postal Service and its post office to bind this isolated community and our country.

My relationship with Halma began in late April, when NAPUS was notified of the Halma Post Office suspension. I entered the process by virtue of my responsibilities as the Minnesota representative to the NAPUS Committee on Post Office Closings and Consolidations. I have served in this capacity for the past two years, but have helped rural communities save their post offices for the past two decades. I grew up in a small farm community located in southeast Minnesota, where the post office is everything. The Closings and Consolidations Committee comprises retired Postmasters from throughout the country, who offer their expertise to communities desiring to save their post offices. NAPUS publishes a pamphlet that educates communities whose post offices are under siege: *the Red Book – A NAPUS Action Guide for Preventing the Closing or Consolidation of Your Post Office*. With your permission, I would like to submit the *Red Book* for the record. Please let me make clear that the Committee does not intervene when a community accepts the closure or consolidation of its post office.

I know that the Commission appreciates the devastating effect that a post office closure, consolidation or suspension can have on a community. It drives a stake through the heart of it. In many instances, the post office is the only spot where residents and business leaders can congregate on a regular basis, and is a source of pride. Also, it's the sole governmental presence. The post office is official recognition that a town exists. A town loses its character when the post office closes. This may not mean a lot to big cities like Minneapolis, St. Paul, or Fargo, but it means everything to small towns like Halma, Viking, Angle Inlet and Pisek, North Dakota. Without their post offices, they would be erased from the map.

When the Postal Service notifies a community that their post office will be terminated, it's usually for one of three reasons: the building is in disrepair, the lease has ended, or the USPS alleges that it is unable to hire a "qualified employee" to fill a Postmaster vacancy. Facility issues occur when the USPS or the property owner fail to maintain the building, or when the lease expires and the Postal Service asserts that there are no alternative post office locations. I believe that in most instances the Postal Service does not use due diligence in locating substitute quarters. And even worse, the Postal Service rebuffs community efforts to locate other sites. In some cases, the Postal Service offers tries to pacify residents with a "contract station." However, these operations are not enduring, because communities are not afforded due process rights against arbitrary

closures. In addition, facility accountability has been an issue with contract stations. Similar problems occur with regard to lackluster efforts to recruit replacements for vacant Postmaster positions. These vacancies can be years-old. For example, Viking, MN has suffered a vacancy since February 2002 and Angle Inlet since September 2005.

Mr. Chairman, I would like to illustrate the necessity of a post office and of the universal service to an isolated community like Angle Inlet. I ask your permission to submit a map of Angle Inlet for the record. The Angle is the only part of the U.S., besides Alaska, that is north of the 49<sup>th</sup> parallel. Moreover, the 152-resident community is contiguous to United States only by water. So, without a post office, Angle residents seeking postal service would be forced to boat across the approximately 20-mile wide “narrows” of the Lake of Woods, or cross into Manitoba, Canada, and then back into Minnesota. Besides the mileage, the difficulty is compounded by four U.S. Customs Service crossings. Closing the Angle Post Office would most definitely cut off the community from the rest of their country.

All these problems are manifested in the Dakota District by the Postal Service’s imposition of a de facto hiring freeze. This policy undermines efforts to fill Postmaster vacancies. As a result, the drought of qualified postal employees is a self-fulfilling prophesy. The Postal Service is tenaciously applying a tight tourniquet on its small post offices, guaranteeing there are no qualified employees. Nonetheless, the Postal Service has the authority to hire non-career employees to staff small post offices. These employees are called Postmaster Reliefs (PMRs). Unfortunately, the Dakota District postal management has refused to consider PMR candidates for a number of vacant post offices. It is preferable to retain qualified Postmasters, but PMRs have been used as a stopgap.

The Postal Service has offered rural delivery to replacement post offices; however, rural delivery is no substitute. Rural delivery does not safeguard a community’s identity; and, just as important, rural delivery is a reduction of service. While rural delivery is an important component of universal service, it is not a post office replacement. Please let me explain. In rural areas such as Halma, businesses and residents need to pick up and deposit mail at their town’s post office for flexibility, regularity and certainty. The mail entrance and exit point to town is the post office. Consequently, the arrival time and the departure time are regular and predictable. Postal customers visit the post office at defined times to transact postal business; they know that their mail will be in their post office box at a particular time. They do not have to wait for the rural carrier at their rural box for the carrier to reach them. This is important for certified mail or the purchase of postal money orders. In fact, in many small towns there is no bank, so the post office serves as the financial institution. In addition, if no one is home on the “farm” when the carrier arrives, postal transactions have to occur miles away at another town’s post office. In fact, one Halma’s businessmen complained to the Postal Service that it would be financially harmful to close his shop and travel to the Karlstad Post Office to conduct postal business.

Ironically, rural delivery does not mean “home” delivery; it could mean delivering to a centrally-located cluster box. I do not know many rural customers who congregate at a cluster box awaiting mail arrival, or lingering to send or receive “accountable” mail. Undeniably, rural deliver – notwithstanding the Postal Service’s claims – is not a substitute for a post office. The absence of a post office undermines the postal equity that universal service provides to rural America.

One of the most distressing facts about post office closings, consolidations and suspensions is the cavalier attitude the postal officials take when contemplating such actions. For example, Mayor Olson was notified of the suspension, by letter, on May 6 – a mere seven days prior to termination. Mockingly, the USPS letter to Halma residents was addressed to Halma, North Dakota – not Halma, Minnesota. There is no Halma in North Dakota! Furthermore, the suspension date was scheduled for May 13 – the same day that the USPS invited the community to meet with Postal officials about the suspension. And, the meeting was scheduled for 10 AM, a time when virtually everyone was at work. In an attempt to save their post office, the town suggested three qualified individuals who could serve as a PMR. Regrettably, the Dakota District deemed all “unqualified”, without even speaking with the candidates or reviewing their résumés. Universal service is too important for towns such as Halma to be treated this way. This is not the way to run a government service – a service for which there is a government obligation.

Commission members, universal postal service still means something to the Nation. It means nondiscriminatory treatment to those communities that need a post office most. While the U.S. Postal Service claims as its mission “universal service” and Congress mandates such service, one has to question the Dakota District’s commitment to the undertaking and to the law. Closing post offices negatively affect the quality of mail service to America and compromises the very existence of rural communities.

Thank you for permitting me to share my views with you.