



United States
General Accounting Office
Washington, D.C. 20548

General Government Division

B-210883

September 2, 1993

The Honorable William L. Clay
Chairman, Committee on Post
Office and Civil Service
House of Representatives



Dear Mr. Chairman:

This letter responds to your request for information on how the U.S. Postal Service plans to use a contractor to help screen job applicants and determine their suitability for postal employment. In August 5, 1993, hearings before two subcommittees of the House Committee on Post Office and Civil Service, Postmaster General Marvin Runyon said that the impending award of the contract was one of several steps to help deal with workplace violence. The Postal Service was finalizing the contract in August 1993 and expected it to be awarded in early September 1993.

We found that the Postal Service plans to contract out for the same kind of information that has been required of it under Postal Service policy for years to screen job applicants. However, the Postal Service has not always obtained the required information. We recommended in 1988, and the Postal Inspection Service similarly recommended in 1992 that the Postal Service strengthen its applicant screening procedures. The Postal Service expects the contract award and other actions it is taking to improve the screening process.

CONTRACTOR IS TO HELP WITH
REQUIRED BACKGROUND CHECKS

According to the contract's statement of work, the contractor is to do portions of required background checks on postal career and noncareer (e.g., transitional and casual) job applicants. The contract, which is for 1 year with three 1-year renewal options, calls for the checks to be done at the request of Postal Service officials in about 100 locations nationwide. The Postal Service estimated that background checks will be

GAO/GGD-93-62R, Employee Background Checks

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requested for approximately 175,000 applicants during each year of the contract.

More specifically, the Postal Service is requesting that a contractor obtain and furnish the following information on postal job applicants for the 5-year period preceding the date of the application:

- criminal conviction records from local (i.e., city or town) and state authorities;
- employment histories from applicants' previous employers/supervisors including (1) the dates of employment, (2) positions held, (3) nature of work, (4) attendance record, (5) disciplinary history, (6) reasons for termination, and (7) if the applicant is no longer working for the employer, whether he/she is eligible to be rehired and if not, why; and
- for those positions that require driving, the driving records of applicants from the appropriate state departments of motor vehicles.¹

Postal Service policy, which is currently stated in the Personnel Operations Handbook EL-311 dated April 1990, requires that suitability determinations be made of all persons seeking postal employment. As a basis for these determinations, staff at the Postal Service's various personnel offices have been required for years to do background checks, a portion of which will now be done by a contractor. The background checks previously required of the personnel offices were to include contacts with applicants' former employers as well as law enforcement agencies and state departments of motor vehicles. These offices will still be required to do portions of the background checks, such as obtaining and reviewing federal criminal and military records.

REQUIRED BACKGROUND CHECKS
WERE NOT ALWAYS DONE

In 1988, we reported that while background checks have always been required, the Postal Service's personnel offices did not always do them.² Following the Edmond, OK, tragedy in August 1986, we reported that none of 15 post offices, 12 of which were

¹The Postal Service estimated that 45,000 individuals will apply for such positions each contract year.

²See Postal Service: Screening Applicants for Employment (GAO/GGD-88-93, June 1988).

reviewed by the Postal Inspection Service and 3 by us, fully complied with existing preemployment screening requirements. All 15 had hired employees without checking their suitability for employment with prior employers and law enforcement agencies as required. Responding to recommendations in our 1988 report, the Postal Service said that it would take steps to improve its compliance with existing screening requirements.

After shooting incidents in November 1991 at postal facilities in Ridgewood, NJ, and Royal Oak, MI, the Postal Inspection Service reviewed the Postal Service's hiring process nationwide. In a September 1992 report, the Inspection Service said that it found a significant lack of Postal Service compliance with required suitability determination procedures. Most of the postal employees in the Inspection Service's sample of 1,532 employees (1,024 career and 508 noncareer) had not received the required full background check. Some personnel offices were not doing local law enforcement checks on any newly hired employees.

The Inspection Service also reported that 57 percent of the career employees in its sample did not have required Federal Bureau of Investigations (FBI) record checks. The Postal Service did not require such checks for noncareer employees. Inspection Service officials said that about 100,000 casual employees had been appointed each year since fiscal year 1987 (one person could receive up to three appointments per year) and that the number of transitional appointments was expected to increase over the next few years. The Inspection Service stressed the need for the Postal Service to improve its screening of noncareer employees as well as career employees.

Our report, as well as that of the Postal Inspection Service, identified a number of reasons for Postal Service noncompliance with background check and screening requirements. In many instances, postal personnel offices had not requested the required information. We reported that it was sometimes difficult for the offices to get information from law enforcement agencies and employers because of privacy and other concerns. The Inspection Service cited the Postal Service's lack of control over its screening and selection process and insufficient training as reasons for the noncompliance. The Inspection Service made recommendations to the Postal Service, including some similar to those we made in our 1988 report, to correct the noncompliance.

The Postal Service took steps after the Inspection Service's report to improve its applicant screening process. Postal Service officials said that along with developing the contract for portions of the background checks, they issued standard procedures and checklists to the postal personnel offices. They

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also said that personnel responsible for screening applicants received training on preemployment screening procedures. In addition, the Postal Service plans to arrange for the Office of Personnel Management to do FBI record checks for noncareer employees beginning in October 1993.

To obtain information for responding to your request, we reviewed the statement of work for the proposed contract and discussed it with Postal Service officials knowledgeable of preemployment screening procedures. We also reviewed related audit reports that we and the Postal Inspection Service issued. In addition, we reviewed the Postal Service's written policies and procedures on preemployment screening but did not evaluate them.

If you have questions or need additional information on this subject, please contact me on (202) 512-8387.

Sincerely yours,

for Michael E. Motley
J. William Gadsby
Director, Government Business
Operations Issues

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