

Veteran letter carrier dies in Dallas, Texas heat wave

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Eugene Gates, a letter carrier with the US Postal Service (USPS), died recently while delivering the mail during a heat wave in Dallas, Texas. He was 66 years old and had been a letter carrier for 38 years.

Gates was based at the Lakewood Post Office in Dallas. After he had left for work on Tuesday, June 20, Gates texted his wife Carla to warn her that it was already 88 degrees Fahrenheit at 7:30 a.m. He cautioned her to be safe. The air conditioning in his own postal vehicle, however, was broken. Gates later collapsed in a homeowner's front yard. The homeowner called 911 and tried to save Gates by administering CPR until the ambulance arrived. Gates was brought to the nearest hospital, where he later died.

On the day of Gates's death, the heat index (that is what the temperature feels like to the human body when relative humidity is considered) was 115 degrees. This was the hottest heat index in the Dallas-Fort Worth area since the 1980s, according to NBC. A heat index of between 103 and 124 degrees is dangerous and entails significant risk of heat cramps and heat exhaustion, according to the National Weather Service. Prolonged exposure or physical activity under these conditions increases the risk of heat stroke.

USPS had recently changed letter carriers' starting time from 7:30 a.m. to 8:30 a.m. Allegedly motivated by staffing issues, this schedule change has increased workers' exposure to the hottest hours of the day. After Gates's death, USPS restored its previous starting time.

Gates took his job seriously, Carla told a local Fox affiliate. He had no major health problems and always took a cooler, water, tea and juice with him on hot days. "[He went to] his regular medical appointments. He went on a regular basis," she told the local Fox affiliate. "My God, he walks eight miles a day. Eight miles a day. Mail to 400 homes. ... He did this for 36,

38 years. He knew how to prepare for the weather."

Carla suspects that Gates died of a heat-related illness. "Being hydrated still didn't save him," she told the *Dallas Morning News*.

"No person, I do not wish this this on anyone," she told Fox. "The postal service needs to change the way they are handling this mail system in the heat. I'm not saying not deliver mail. Maybe when the heat is extreme like Tuesday, maybe deliver mail at different times." She called for earlier, split and later shifts to help workers avoid the hottest part of the day.

The families on Gates's route remember him fondly. Megan Lucas, who also spoke to Fox, said that Gates had been delivering her mail for more than a year. She often tried to give Gates a cold towel and water whenever she saw him delivering mail on hot days. "He loved his job. He loved the neighbors," said Lucas. "That's so sad that a wife is mourning her husband—and children and grandchildren. This neighborhood will definitely mourn him."

As of this writing, no official cause has been given for Gates's death. His family is awaiting the results of an independent autopsy that they requested. The Occupational Safety and Health Administration also is investigating the death.

When Carla tried to get in touch with human resources at USPS, she was given the runaround. She described communication from USPS about her husband's benefits as "awful." A week after Gates's death, the agency still had not called her to offer its condolences.

A representative of Branch 132 of the National Association of Letter Carriers (NALC) union, of which Gates was a member, visited Carla but refused to comment on whether the heat may have contributed to Gates's death. The union's official statement on

Gates's death does not mention the exceptionally high heat index on the day it occurred. Four days after his death, NALC President Brian L. Renfroe issued a statement warning workers about the risks of excessive heat, without mentioning Gates at all.

In comments to the *Dallas Morning News*, Branch 132 President Kimetra Lewis sought to absolve USPS of responsibility. "I'm not placing blame on anybody," she said. "I just wish everybody would take heed and understand that it's hard working in these types of environments." But Gates's awareness, as a veteran letter carrier, of the dangers of heat exposure tragically was not enough. Lewis also announced that the union is investigating Gates's death and seeking to determine whether appropriate safety precautions had been enacted at the Lakewood post office.

For its part, USPS denies that Gates's death was related to the heat. The agency's position is motivated not only by its desire to avoid legal liability, but also by its opposition to serious measures to protect city and rural letter carriers from excessive heat.

In 2022, the *New York Times* reported that at least 270 UPS and USPS drivers had been sickened, hospitalized or died due to heat exposure since 2015. UPS driver Esteban Chavez died from the heat in California on June 25 last year, the day after his 24th birthday. Another UPS driver in Arizona collapsed from the heat on a homeowner's front porch last year.

At UPS, where national contract talks have been ongoing since the spring, the Teamsters bureaucracy is boasting about its great "victory" in supposedly getting air conditioning for the UPS trucks. In reality, this will apply only to trucks purchased in 2024 or later. Given that UPS trucks often remain in operation for 25 years or more, workers will still be without air conditioning by the middle of the 21st century.

Older vehicles will only be equipped with two fans to blow hot air around. Conditions at USPS, where mail trucks also do not have air conditioning, are little better.



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