

SICK LEAVE

MAKING THE MOST OF SICK LEAVE

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As federal employees, career Mail Handlers receive 104 hours of sick leave per year. Better yet, our sick leave rolls over year to year. This is a great benefit but, as we all know, USPS management hates it when we use our sick time. We don't always have a choice about how to use sick leave, but this article is about useful strategies for using your sick time and how to maximize its value when you do have some control.

Sick leave can be used for our own illness. In addition, thanks to the MOU on Sick Leave for Dependent Care, we can also use up to 80 hours per calendar year to care for a spouse, parent, or dependent child who has any illness we could take sick leave for. In addition, under our Bereavement Leave MOU, employees may use up to three days of sick (or annual or LWOP) leave for bereavement leave per year for the loss

of a child, parent, spouse, sibling, grandchild, or grandparent. Lastly sick leave remaining at the end of our careers will be counted as time worked and slightly boost our pensions.

We can't always control our health or when we must use our sick leave, but when we can it is advisable to save a decent amount of sick time for emergencies and for our later years when illness is more likely, and our aging bodies are suffering wear and tear. You never know when you will have an illness or off the job injury that will keep you out of work and having sick leave is great insurance to have to avoid loss of pay.

Even though the Postal Service gives us this sick leave benefit, they often resort to discipline when we use unscheduled sick leave which is defined as "any absence not requested and approved in advance" of the leave usage. When management considers

sick leave usage to be unacceptable, they will often discipline us. When this happens, ask to see your Union Steward and file a grievance on any discipline issued. We have a solid track record on fighting discipline and there is a very good chance we can get your discipline reduced in length or severity or possibly expunged. Just remember, we only have 14 days to file so make sure your steward knows about it right away.

Whenever possible, Mail Handlers should try to request scheduled leave and get it approved in advance by providing a note from your health care provider along with a USPS form 3971 to your supervisor. Examples of leave that might be scheduled in advance include a routine exams or non-emergency surgeries or procedures, as well as any associated recovery time as determined by your health care provider.



It is almost never a good idea to use annual leave instead of sick leave. In my experience, management will still use any unscheduled absence against you and annual leave is worth cash money when you retire, while sick leave is merely credited as time worked.

Another option for serious health conditions is to obtain coverage under the Family Medical Leave Act or FMLA. Once an absence is certified as FMLA approved for your health condition by your health care provider and approved by the USPS, leave taken for this qualifying condition cannot be used against you in the discipline process. FMLA may be approved for any number of acute conditions including accidents, injuries, strokes, cancer, or pregnancy. If you have a serious chronic condition and see your health care provider at least twice a year for that condition, less obvious ailments like asthma, depression, migraine

headaches, or gout may qualify under the FMLA as well. For chronic conditions, it is imperative for your health care provider to accurately estimate the frequency and duration of episodes of incapacity for your condition. This will ensure that you have the ability to be off of work when you need to be and keep management off your back. Recertification is generally not required until after you first try to use leave in the next calendar year. Note that if you exceed the frequency and duration estimated by your health care provider, you may be asked for updated certification.

For those lucky enough to reach retirement age in excellent health with a decent amount of sick leave, the amount of sick leave you retire with will be added to the years of service credited to your pension as if you had worked those hours. For easy math, 2080 hours of saved sick leave at retirement today

would result in approximately \$740 per year in additional retirement pay.

For those who are near retirement with health problems that need significant treatment and recovery, like a knee or hip replacement, you have options. You could retire then get the extra pension credit and receive treatment and recover on your own time, but that would be the least financially advantageous. You could also use your sick leave before your desired retirement date to get that surgery you've been putting off. While the financial implications of pursuing any option will differ for each individual employee, delaying your retirement date for the length of your treatment and recovery will allow you to get full paychecks while you have surgery and recovery time AND you still get the time worked credit.

Wishing you good health and a long and healthy retirement,