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## Bizarre postal bonding

Goofy games cost public millions as stamp prices soar

Special Investigation

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WASHINGTON — They bark like a pack of dogs, quack like a flock of ducks and hiss like a nest of vipers.

They wrap each other from head to toe in toilet paper and aluminium foil and pipe cleaners.

They build sandcastles and gingerbread houses and practice picking up oranges while blindfolded.

These are the professional auditors and investigators who police the United States Postal Service.

The mission of the USPS Office of Inspector General is to make the mail more efficient and cost-effective by rooting out waste, fraud, abuse and mismanagement.

Yet hundreds of IG staffers have been taking part in bizarre bonding and team-building exercises and playing goofy games that burn up millions of dollars — and appear to do little or nothing to curb postal inefficiencies, a Daily News investigation found.

As stamp prices and postal deficits soared over the past few years, the agency's well-paid, highly trained employees got a lesson in scat singing, took an outing to a racetrack — and delved into the history of the Civil War during a \$100,000 retreat to the battlefield at Gettysburg.



Postal Inspector General Karla Corcoran is lifted by 500 postal workers at conference last year in Washington.

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On USPS time, they've composed Christmas carols, belted out "We Are Family" at sing-alongs, conducted mock trials in which witnesses were paraded before a judge and jury — and played children's games like follow the leader.

Under the supervision of Postal Inspector General Karla Corcoran, civil servants have been paid to emit animal sounds, embark on treasure hunts, dress in cat costumes and seek the counsel of make-believe wizards, magicians and mad scientists at mass gatherings of the workforce.

They've been jetting into the capital from 15 field offices around the nation for "annual recognition conferences" that celebrate the organization and its values. The tab for the last three confabs: \$3.6 million, including planning and salary costs.

At one such event, at the Renaissance Washington D.C. Hotel in January 2002, a blindfolded and barefoot Corcoran was swaddled in a blue blanket and hoisted into the air above a hotel ballroom on colored ropes and strings manipulated by some 500 of her 725 employees.

The point of lifting the boss skyward: To show that by working together as a team, they could accomplish a task that would have been impossible to perform alone.

#### **\$117 million**

Who foots the bill for these shenanigans? You do. Every penny of the IG's \$117 million annual budget comes from the stamp-buying public.

"Each time your Aunt Minnie sticks a 37-cent stamp on an envelope, she's funding an agency that's off track, off message, off mission — and off its rocker," said Leslie Paige, vice president of Citizens Against Government Waste, which tracks the misspending of public funds.

So much agency time, energy and money has been consumed in retreats, conferences, picnics, parties and game-playing, team-building outings that the mandate to ferret out USPS ineptitude has taken a back seat, a dozen current and former employees told The News.

"Touchy-feely bonding exercises, management retreats at first-class hotels and annual celebratory events all divert resources that could be better invested in audits and investigations," said Debra Ritt, the agency's former No. 1 auditor.

After some 50 past and present staffers approached Senate Finance Committee Chairman Chuck Grassley with allegations of waste and mismanagement, the Iowa Republican launched a probe of Corcoran's six-year tenure as IG.

"I question whether spending tens of thousands of dollars for an afternoon of treasure hunting sets the gold standard for prudence," Grassley told The News. The President's Council on Integrity and Efficiency, which polices

the federal inspector-general community, also is probing the allegations.

### Keeping mum

Corcoran, who has run the office since it was created in 1997, refused interview requests over a three-week period. It would be "inappropriate" to comment, a spokeswoman said, while the investigation is going on.

The \$142,500-a-year IG — a veteran of former Vice President Al Gore's reinventing government initiative — serves at the pleasure of the USPS Board of Governors and is in the last year of a seven-year term.

In written responses to questions, the agency said its audits and probes of postal operations have identified \$2.2 billion in potential, projected and actual savings during the past six years.

Its team-and-leadership development programs mirror those offered by corporate giants and consume only minimal resources, officials claim. They help workers learn more about each other, and themselves, so they can discover novel ways to think and work together.

The exercises also teach acceptance of five core workplace values that the agency instills in all staffers: teamwork, leadership, communication, creativity and conceptualization — better known in IG parlance as "TLC3."

Wrapping people in toilet paper, for instance, displayed teamwork; building sandcastles showed creativity; mimicking animals involved conceptualization. Besides, said agency spokeswoman Laura Whitaker, when "fun and humor" are integrated into the workplace, people become more productive and creative and absenteeism and downtime plummet.

Fun and humor, however, is not how ex-employees such as John Rooney, a former special assistant to Corcoran, describe the organization.

"We were forced to play silly games, build gingerbread houses and sing songs praising Karla, and I found the whole thing humiliating, demoralizing and nonproductive," Rooney said.

Adds Ritt, "Auditors tend to be private, analytical and conservative. Making them sing to large groups, orate and give testimonials shows a lack of respect for their professionalism."

As for "TLC3," employees say it's an agency obsession. In E-mail messages obtained by The News, they've been told to play a "values game" and embark on a "values journey" that uses zany clues to test their TLC3 IQ.

"We never really focused on how we could make the Postal Service better because we were always focused on how much we loved TLC3," said Billy Sauls, the agency's former top investigator.

Among the games the office of inspector general plays:

- **TLC3-by-the-Sea.**

In freezing temperatures, 50 managers on their hands and knees built sandcastles on a beach in Ocean City, Md., in November 2000. It was one event in a week-long, team-building retreat. Cost: \$35,000.

- **Sing-alongs and Colored Dots.**

At a four-day conference at a Washington hotel in January 2001, 650 employees sang "We Are Family," performed skits like "Evolution of the Values" and wore colored dots that represented personality traits. Cost: \$1.2 million, including \$97,000 for planning, \$167,000 to fly people in from 15 field offices and \$126,000 to lodge them.

- **Pari-mutuel Wagering.**

At a management committee retreat in Shepherdstown, W.Va., in spring 2001, a motivational speaker taught "emotional intelligence" and execs bet on simulcast horse racing at the nearby Tri-State Greyhound Park.

The racetrack trip was "completely personal, nonmandatory and an after-hour activity," Whitaker said. But managers, who bet with their own money, said they were expected to attend. Cost of retreat: \$11,500, not counting salaries.

- **Full-Body Wrap.**

At a so-called Summerfest for the Denver field office in a park in Aurora, Colo., in 2001, two dozen staffers wrapped each other from head to toe in toilet paper, aluminium foil, straws and pipe cleaners.

- **Boosting the Boss.**

At the three-day "annual recognition conference" in Washington in January 2002, employees built tents out of newspapers, hopscotched across a ballroom on squares labeled with TLC3 values, learned scat singing and hoisted Corcoran aloft. Cost: \$1.3 million for 698 attendees, including \$192,000 in transportation; \$117,000 in lodging; \$102,000 for planning; \$89,000 for food and beverages; \$115,000 for a production company and \$32,500 to Outward Bound for the team-building exercises.

- **The Blue and the Gray.**

At a \$100,000 leadership retreat in Gettysburg, Pa., in February 2002, 150 people toured the Civil War battle site to learn the lessons of Pickett's Charge, a famously failed Confederate counterattack.

The battlefield is a "natural laboratory for examining leadership and decision-making," the agency said.

Joyce Hansen, former director of audit operations for the IG, had a different view. "Bonding at Gettysburg doesn't exactly set a good example

when the Postal Service is \$1 billion in debt," she said.

- **Dogs, Ducks and Wizards.**

At the annual conference in Washington at the Grand Hyatt Hotel last December, 725 employees went on a treasure hunt to seek clues about TLC3 from costumed actors playing a wizard, magician, dragon, princess and mad scientist.

They used Hawaiian leis to spell out the TLC3 values as different teams barked, quacked, waddled, hissed and slithered. Addressing the confab was self-esteem guru Jack Canfield, author of the best-selling "Chicken Soup for the Soul."

Cost: \$1.1 million, including \$40,545 for the treasure hunt, \$18,700 to pay Canfield, \$187,000 for transportation, \$106,000 for lodging, \$109,000 for planning, \$96,000 for food and drink and \$85,000 for a production company.

Said Grassley, "I question whether an IG's office that focuses so much attention on what appears to be frivolous behavior is able to provide the level of oversight that Americans deserve."

But Karla Corcoran's spokeswoman says the USPS watchdog is not striving to be just one more traditional governmental bureaucracy.

"Some may disagree with our organizational philosophy," said Whitaker. "But there is no doubt that our work has had a positive effect on the Postal Service's bottom line."

## Games Post Office probers play

- **November 2000**

**Event:** Leadership retreat

**Where:** Sheraton Fontaine-bleau Hotel, Ocean City, Md.

**Activities:** Building sandcastles

**Cost:** \$35,000

- **December 2000**

**Event:** Christmas party

**Where:** Fort Myer, Arlington, Va.

**Activities:** Singing carols

**Cost:** N/A

- **January 2001**

**Event:** Fourth Annual Recognition Conference

**Where:** Renaissance Washington D.C. Hotel

**Activities:** Singing, performing skits, wearing colored dots

**Cost:** \$1.2 million

- **Spring 2001**

**Event:** Management committee retreat

**Where:** Bavarian Inn, Shepherdstown, W.Va.

**Activities:** Pari-mutuel wagering

**Cost:** \$11,500

• **Summer 2001**

**Event:** Summerfest picnic, headquarters

**Where:** Fort McNair, Washington, D.C.

**Activities:** Bonding exercises, fashion show

**Cost:** N/A

• **Summer 2001**

**Event:** Summerfest picnic, Denver field office

**Where:** Cherry Creek State Park, Aurora, Colo.

**Activities:** Toilet paper, aluminum foil and pipe cleaner body wrapping

**Cost:** \$535

• **Fall 2001**

**Event:** Training and planning session

**Where:** William F. Bolger USPS Center for Leadership Development, Potomac, Md.

**Activities:** Children's game, "Can I Come to the Party?"

**Cost:** N/A

• **December 2001**

**Event:** Winterfest Christmas party

**Where:** Fort Myer, Arlington, Va.

**Activities:** Building gingerbread houses

**Cost:** N/A

• **January 2002**

**Event:** Fifth Annual Recognition Conference

**Where:** Renaissance Washington D.C. Hotel

**Activities:** Scat singing, hoisting blindfolded Inspector General Karla Corcoran aloft

**Cost:** \$1.3 million

• **February 2002**

**Event:** Leadership retreat

**Where:** Eisenhower Inn & Conference Center, Gettysburg, Pa.

**Activities:** Studying Civil War history

**Cost:** \$100,000

• **Summer 2002**

**Event:** Summerfest picnic, headquarters

**Where:** Andrews Air Force Base, Camp Springs, Md.

**Activities:** A "Jeopardy"-style game

**Cost:** N/A

• **Summer 2002**

**Event:** Summerfest picnic, Denver field office

**Where:** Dedisse-Denver Mountain Park, Evergreen, Colo.

**Activities:** A blindfolded version of "Follow the Leader"

**Cost:** N/A

• **December 2002**


**Event:** Sixth Annual Recognition Conference

**Where:** Grand Hyatt Hotel, Washington

**Activities:** Treasure hunt, animal mimicking

**Cost:** \$1.1 million

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