

Considerations to Stop Jester Residential Postal Mail Cluster-Box Break-Ins

Ms. Terry and Ms. Sharon, two mail carriers from the Jollyville Post Office who service Jester Estates, provided input as concerned citizens, reviewed this document and OK'd including their first names.

Jester Residential Mailbox Break-ins Friday 26June. Around 3-4AM, Friday, 26June, eleven (11) residential cluster mailboxes were vandalized and mail stolen. This represents mail for about 110 residences/families in Jester Estates from this one break-in. The picture below shows one vandalized cluster box on Orange Street; the blue 8 inch crowbar used is shown on the ground. There are about 65 such cluster mailboxes in Jester.



Additionally, the day of this writing, Ms. Terry shared that early Thursday morning (10July) three (3) more Jester cluster mailboxes were broken into and mail stolen. All 3 mailboxes had signs posted advising residents of a special neighborhood meeting Tuesday 15July to discuss the mailbox break-ins.

Frequency of Jester cluster-mailbox vandalism/thefts and time to repair. Our recollection is there have been 3 such break-ins that we know of in Jester in the last 18 or so months including the one above. Each time, residents have waited for the Postal Service to repair/replace the mailboxes and meanwhile travel miles to the Jollyville Post Office to wait in line to pick up their daily mail. Repairs/replacements have taken 3.5 to 8 months. Calls to our US Congressional Representative have greatly reduced the wait time.

Three Other Neighborhoods serviced by the Jollyville Post Office have in recent months suffered similar break-ins according to Ms. Terry.

Citizen actions effectiveness to prevent residential mailbox break-ins. Ms. Terry shared that in nearby communities, residents have reported mailbox break-ins to city police and to the US Postal Inspection Service including videos of the crime using resident-installed cameras. The Jester HOA hired a security service to patrol for a while, and residents have installed cameras and placed signs on the cluster mailboxes warning potential thieves that they are being videotaped. None of these actions have deterred further break-ins. For such mail thefts in Jester Estates, there have been no arrests except one where the suspect was apprehended by a USPS inspector in San Marcos about 6 months ago with stacks of stolen mail, including checks.

US Postal Inspection Service (USPIS) actions to mitigate Jester mailbox break-ins. In recent months according to Ms. Terry, the USPIS has replaced 7 of the vandalized cluster-mail boxes with new vandalism/theft resistant cluster boxes. These new mailboxes are designed to prevent crowbar break-ins and are opened by mail carriers with a specially designed master key with a totally different configuration than conventional keys. They cannot be copied at places like Home Depot.

Ms. Terry shared that this has not resolved the problem. She knows of two postal mail carriers who've been robbed of the special key at gunpoint, in daytime, while on their delivery routes. The suspects took the special key and reproduced it themselves, subsequently resulting in multiple mail thefts from the new vandalism-resistant cluster mailboxes.

The Post Office is now working to provide mail carriers with new master keys, each specific for a given neighborhood, area or zip code, for all cluster mailboxes old and new.

The National situation. In May 2024, the GAO reported that “in recent years, letter carriers in D.C., Chicago, Portland, and other places have been robbed at gunpoint. USPS facilities and collection boxes across the country have also been broken into. Why attack USPS? These thieves want your mail—including personal checks which can be altered and cashed or sold online.” The problem is here now.

The FBI and USPS warned that, nationally, check fraud is on the rise, with a significant volume enabled through mail theft. Suspicious Activity Reports related to check fraud nearly doubled from 2021 to 2023.

Laws against postal mail theft and mail theft at gunpoint from US mail carriers.

Federal law states that any theft or tampering with mail violates federal statutes. Specifically, 18 U.S. Code § 1708 outlines the illegality of stealing, taking, or by fraudulent means obtaining mail from various sources such as mailboxes and post offices.

Consequences include severe fines of up to \$250,000 and up to five years in jail. The USPS is charged with enforcement.

Texas Penal Code, PENAL § 31.20. Mail Theft, states that if a person intentionally appropriates mail from another person's mailbox or premises without the effective consent of the addressee and with the intent to deprive that addressee of the mail, it's a felony if appropriated from at least 10 addressees, and a Class A misdemeanor if appropriated from fewer than 10 addressees.

Law enforcement. The US Postal Inspection Service (USPIS) is the law enforcement arm of the postal service. USPIS Postal Inspectors are federal law enforcement officers who carry firearms, make arrests, execute federal search warrants, and serve subpoenas. Over 1200 inspectors enforce federal laws covering crimes involving the postal system.

The USPS is the lead law enforcement agency for mail crime and is responsible for protecting postal employees and the mail, enforcing postal laws and conducting criminal investigations and presenting evidence to U.S. Attorneys and other prosecutors.

Postal inspectors have organized special operations in areas where robberies and other serious US mail crimes have increased. The goal, which began in May 2023, is to surge resources into an area to disrupt and prevent crimes, gather information about crime trends, and arrest criminal suspects. However, in 2023 the Government Accounting Office (GAO) reported that “the Inspection Service hasn’t assessed its postal police workforce needs since 2011”.

This means that the USPIS, which has limited resources, takes jurisdictional lead in the enforcement of postal laws such as mail theft and, as needed, requests additional support from local/city/state police and other federal law enforcement agencies. Because USPIS has the lead, local law enforcement (also with limited resources) often does not take the initiative beyond preventative suggestions to the community.

Austin Police Department (APD). KXAN reported (July2025) the following (Google):

Over the past several years, APD has seen almost a 30% increase in mail theft from 2022 to 2023, and those numbers are not slowing down. Incidents reported in 2024 indicated a widespread issue within the community, according to a memo sent from Austin Police Chief Lisa Davis to Austin City Council. In the memo, Davis said APD will meet with community members including residents, representatives of homeowner and neighborhood associations... to discuss “neighborhood-level concerns.” These conversations will help the department assess safety plans, the memo said.

Additionally, this will allow the department to develop tailored response plans which could include direct police watch and security site assessments.

Site assessments are conducted for police to determine which areas will need improved security. APD staff may recommend the following, according to the memo:

- Additional lighting
- Camera installations
- Changes to landscaping to help prevent crime from occurring.

The department also plans to develop and roll out campaigns to raise awareness and prevention across the city's social media platforms.

Investigations and arrests by Austin PD are not mentioned perhaps because that's the responsibility of the USPIS enforcement arm.

Some Options Going Forward. The above information suggests that, per Google, "Most police departments won't consider package theft a high priority unless there's evidence, like CCTV [closed circuit television where live video is transmitted to monitors] or multiple cases in the same area." CCTV installation seems untenable. However, collection of multiple police case report files from many mailbox break-ins in our area is feasible. These reports for our area may provide USPIS with evidence from enough cases to focus their resources here, investigate and enforce the law for these many Jester mailbox break-ins.

An experienced Texas State Trooper shared the following about our situation.

He said USPIS is definitely the lead law enforcement agency for these mailbox break-ins.

Cases start with the local sheriff's office or police department which write and file incident reports. He said, go to our local APD substation that services our neighborhood and provide them with a Freedom of Information (FOI) request (can be hand-written) for a copy of all residential mailbox mail theft reports in our neighborhood and nearby neighborhoods. The FOI request should specify the sector (street boundaries North, South, East and West) and the inclusive date range (from X to Y dates).

The FOI request to APD can include our neighborhood plus adjacent neighborhoods serviced by the Jollyville Post Offices to obtain as many nearby cases as possible. Any US citizen can submit an FOI request, but an HOA request might have more impact. Provision of a copy to our US Congressional Representative might help.

Once obtained via FOI, these collective reports, plus any additional cases we have, can be submitted together as an overall incident report for our area to the USPIS office requesting investigation and law enforcement of cases here. All cases may not provide actionable evidence, but they will underscore the extent of the problem here to prompt action.

To obtain as many reports as feasible, the Jester Warbler can encourage residents whose mailboxes have been broken into and mail stolen to report the theft to APD and also to the USPS, emphasizing money and checks stolen. Apparently, Ms. Terry has been asked to write the Warbler article(s) and has accepted.

Another option to think about are dye packs. Dye packs are used by banks in currency bundles to deter bank robberies and ATM break-ins. They can be triggered by various mechanisms including physical stress (like crowbars). If a package or valuable item equipped with a dye pack is placed in a dummy box in a cluster box by a USPS inspector or mail carrier(?) (not a resident) and the mailbox is broken into and the item removed, the dye pack should trigger. The dye would stain the stolen item (like a check or money), rendering it difficult to sell or use and marking the thief. Some dye packs also contain tracking devices that transmit to police, aiding in apprehension. Perhaps USPS has already considered dye packs.

For the upcoming Jester group meeting at the Red Lotus restaurant to discuss the break-ins, perhaps the police chief can address the feasibility of using dye packs.

Ms. Terry and Ms. Sharon indicated they plan to attend the meeting as interested citizens. Ms. Terry called the USPS office who said they're reviewing schedules to see if one of their USPS inspectors can also attend. Additionally, inviting the Jester area US Congressional Representative's staff member in Austin responsible for addressing residential mailbox break-ins (512-916-5921) might also be helpful.