

NEWS

Thieves raiding Valley mailboxes prompt Postal Service to take action



Photo of capped/locked snorkel type collection boxes.

By **GREG WILCOX** | gwilcox@scng.com | Daily News

PUBLISHED: April 23, 2016 at 9:38 p.m. | UPDATED: August 18, 2020 at 10:45 a.m.

On a recent Sunday night, Mike Bloodworth spotted something fishy going on. It looked like someone was going fishing, but there was no stream or pond nearby.

Bloodworth suspected the person was about to break into the big blue mailbox across the street from his Van Nuys home. So he turned his lights on and the person hustled off.

“In the last couple of days I’ve noticed people fishing in the mail box trying to pull mail out,” he said. “I’ve seen it happen three other times before. It’s usually three or four in the morning. People come up to the box and loiter and then stick the fishing tool in.”

Turns out that fishing, or stealing mail, has become so common that postal officials have been retrofitting boxes around the San Fernando Valley and other areas to make them more tamper proof, said Richard J. Maher, spokesman for Post Office operations in Los Angeles and Orange counties.

“We do this where we have had incidents, or there is a problem where the box may be out in a not very well lit public place. The boxes have been retrofitted all over Southern California,” he said.



San Fernando Valley locations include Sherman Oaks, Van Nuys, North Hollywood and Tarzana, Maher said.

Postal Service statistics on mail theft nationally indicate some progress is being made. The service investigated 1,400 cases in fiscal year 2015, down from 1,525 the year before, according to spokesman Frank J. Schissler. Also more than 2,500 arrests were made in fiscal year 2015, Schissler said, up from 2,335 in 2014.

Convictions decreased to 2,048 in fiscal 2015 from 2,195 in the prior year, he said via email.

Mail box retrofitting began last year but officials could not say how many boxes have been modified.

“We’re doing what we can to make these boxes safer,” Maher said.

One security method involves welding shut the drop-down door on walk-up mail boxes, and replacing it with a single slot so letters can be fed in one at a time.

“This helps prevent the fishing and we also have an anti-fishing device placed inside the boxes,” Maher said. “It is a ledge (type device) so that once a letter goes down in them it can’t come back up again.”

Some drive-up boxes have been fitted with red locking caps. Some double-box installations are fitted with a big red cover and a really big black lock.

The caps and covers are put on at the last pickup of the day and removed the following morning.

“We’re doing what we can to make these boxes safe, Maher said.

He also has some advice for people who deposit mail in boxes that have not been retrofitted.

“Be aware of the pickup times and put your mail in before the final pickup of the day. You don’t want your mail sitting there overnight or over the weekend,” Maher said. “If customers ... leave their mail in boxes over night or over the weekend, thieves under the cover of darkness can tamper with the mail.”

Thieves most often are looking to make some quick cash and can take extreme measures.

Earlier this year some thieves broke open a box at the West Hills post office, said Stacia Crane, spokesman for the USPS Inspection Service.

“It’s a crime of opportunity. They are looking for something they can counterfeit. A check that can be washed or reissued or a money order. They are looking for a quick way to turn it (stolen mail) into money so they can give it to their drug dealer in return for drugs. (The) drug dealer then has longer to turn that into identity theft.”

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