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## **Designated an Essential Industry, Private Shipping Centers Offer Enhanced Services and Procedures**

**By Brandon Gale**

Millions of consumers and businesses across the United States have long relied on private shipping centers for important services for their families and customers. More than 10,000 retail shipping locations — independent and franchise stores — in all 50 states plus Puerto Rico and the US Virgin Islands — ship more than 9 million packages and pieces of mail every week. Over 12 million Americans use one of these store locations as their address to receive all mail and packages, amounting to 90 million letters and packages each week for these mailbox customers.

These services have taken on heightened importance as the Coronavirus pandemic jeopardizes the wellbeing of American families and disrupts lives and businesses.

Retail shipping centers have been designated an essential industry by the federal government in recognition of the greater need for their services, and thus remain open to serve consumers, businesses, and individuals working remotely from home during the national health emergency. Private shipping center owner-operators are performing a vital role for consumers and businesses who are more dependent on their services and products for access to important packages, supplies, and business material. Restrictions imposed in response to the Coronavirus pandemic create challenges ranging from delivery of prescription medication to crucial industrial parts and important business and legal documents, needed by people working from home for the first time, many of whom need help with digital communications and office supplies.

Retail Shipping Associates, the largest trade organization supporting the interests of the retail shipping community, maintains long-standing relationships with carriers, thereby enhancing access to the services of the USPS, UPS, FedEx, and DHL for consumers and businesses. This has become much more important as a result of the Coronavirus pandemic.

While still in the midst of this national health crisis, the retail shipping industry quickly adopted procedures and policies to protect both staff and customers in line with guidance from the US Centers for Disease Control. Retail shipping locations are applying CDC best practices for cleanliness and social distancing, and aggressively deep cleaning and disinfecting their facilities.

Reflecting increased and shifting needs of consumers and businesses, center owner operators are also introducing new and enhanced customer services. Many of these changes and

innovations will likely be long lasting, in line with profound changes in the marketplace after the pandemic has subsided.

These changes are designed to support what will likely be a new normal in the way all businesses function — more staff will be home-based and therefore will need convenient (neighborhood) access to products and services typically accessed at 'the office'; expanded print and document design and production, alternate address package and mail receiving/returns processing, notary service, expanded office supplies and PPE inventory, etc.

RSA is also working closely with our carrier partners to develop new systems and processes to leverage the robust retail footprint our industry offers to improve first and final mile pickup and delivery density, efficiencies, and customer experience.

As a community of 10,500 small business entrepreneurs, the retail shipping and business services industry has demonstrated the ability and flexibility to adapt and adjust to changing market conditions for 4 decades. The COVID 19 virus crisis is certainly an unprecedented challenge. But challenge leads to opportunity, and American creativity and entrepreneurship will bring the changes needed to prevail over a tough adversary and enable all of us to rebuild.

*President of Retail Shipping Associates, the largest trade organization supporting the interests of the retail shipping and business services community, Brandon Gale got started in the retail shipping industry in 1984 as co-founder of Eagle Postal Centers, a 38 store chain of licensed and corporate retail shipping centers located in Texas. As a 36-year industry veteran, Brandon has extensive experience in every aspect of the industry. He previously served as president of Associated Mail & Parcel Centers, a business league serving the interests of independent retail shipping center operators. In that role, he co-founded the Retail Shipping Institute and initiated the industry's first risk management program, the HIPDR Ship Responsibly program. He developed the USPS Approved Shipper Program with Pat Donahoe (former USPS Postmaster General) Brandon has designed and built stores from the ground up, orchestrated store conversions and remodeling, trained thousands of store owners and staff, and consulted with Sears, Pitney Bowes, GLG consulting, Archer Management, Southern Methodist University, Brookhaven College, University of Texas at Dallas, and other companies and educational institutions.*