

## § 959.28

copy of the application to the General Counsel, who shall file a written reply within 10 days after filing, or such other period as the Judicial Officer may fix. A copy of the reply shall be sent to the applicant by the Recorder. Thereafter an order granting or denying such application in whole or in part will be issued by the Judicial Officer.

[39 FR 33213, Sept. 16, 1974, as amended at 63 FR 66052, Dec. 1, 1998]

### § 959.28 Computation of time.

A designated period of time excludes the day the period begins, and includes the last day of the period unless the last day is a Saturday, Sunday, or legal holiday, in which event the period runs until the close of business on the next business day.

### § 959.29 Official record.

The transcript of testimony together with all pleadings, orders, exhibits, briefs and other documents filed in the proceedings shall constitute the official record of the proceeding.

### § 959.30 Public information.

The Librarian of the Postal Service maintains for public inspection in the Library copies of all initial, tentative and final decisions of the Postal Service. The Recorder maintains the complete official record of every proceeding.

[39 FR 33213, Sept. 16, 1974, as amended at 63 FR 66052, Dec. 1, 1998]

### § 959.31 Ex parte communications.

The provisions of 5 U.S.C. 551(14), 556(d) and 557(d) prohibiting ex parte communications are made applicable to proceedings under these rules of practice.

[42 FR 5358, Jan. 28, 1977]

## PART 960—EQUAL ACCESS TO JUSTICE ACT IN POSTAL SERVICE PROCEEDINGS

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AUTHORITY: 5 U.S.C. 504 (c)(1); 39 U.S.C. 204, 401 (2).

SOURCE: 46 FR 45945, Sept. 16, 1981, unless otherwise noted.

### Subpart A—General Provisions

#### § 960.1 Purpose of these rules.

The Equal Access to Justice Act, 5 U.S.C. 504 (called “the Act” in this part), provides for the award of attorney fees and other expenses to eligible individuals and entities who are parties to certain administrative proceedings (called “adversary adjudications”) before the Postal Service. An eligible party may receive an award when it prevails over the Postal Service, unless the Postal Service’s position was substantially justified or special circumstances make an award unjust. The rules in this part describe the parties eligible for awards and the proceedings that are covered. They also explain how to apply for awards, and the procedures and standards that the Postal Service will use to make them.

[46 FR 45945, Sept. 16, 1981, as amended at 52 FR 6797, Mar. 5, 1987]

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### § 960.2 When the Act applies.

The Act applies to any adversary adjudication pending or commenced before the Postal Service on or after August 5, 1985. It also applies to any adversary adjudication commenced on or after October 1, 1984, and finally disposed of before August 5, 1985, provided that an application for fees and expenses, as described in subpart B of these rules, has been filed with the Postal Service within 30 days after August 5, 1985, and to any adversary adjudication pending on or commenced on or after October 1, 1981, in which an application for fees and other expenses was timely filed and was dismissed for lack of jurisdiction.

[52 FR 6797, Mar. 5, 1987]

### § 960.3 Proceedings covered.

(a) The Act applies to adversary adjudications conducted by the Postal Service. These are:

(1) Adjudications under 5 U.S.C. 554 in which the position of the Postal Service is presented by an attorney or other representative who enters an appearance and participates in the proceeding (for the Postal Service, the types of proceedings generally covered are proceedings relative to false representation and cease and desist orders and mailability under chapter 30 of title 39, U.S.C., with the exception of proceedings under 39 U.S.C. 3008); and

(2) Appeals of decisions of contracting officers made pursuant to section 6 of the Contract Disputes Act of 1978 (41 U.S.C. 605) before the Postal Service Board of Contract Appeals as provided in section 8 of that Act. (41 U.S.C. 607).

(b) The Postal Service may also designate a proceeding not listed in paragraph (a) of this section as an adversary adjudication for purposes of the Act by so stating in an order initiating the proceeding or designating the matter for hearing. The failure to designate a proceeding as an adversary adjudication shall not preclude the filing of an application by a party who believes the proceeding is covered by the Act; whether the proceeding is covered will then be an issue for resolution in proceedings on the application.

(c) If a proceeding includes both matters covered by the Act and matters specifically excluded from coverage, any award made will include only fees and expenses related to covered issues.

[46 FR 45945, Sept. 16, 1981, as amended at 52 FR 6798, Mar. 5, 1987; 67 FR 62179, Oct. 4, 2002]

### § 960.4 Eligibility of applicants.

(a) To be eligible for an award of attorney fees and other expenses under the Act, the applicant must be a party to the adversary adjudication for which it seeks an award. The term "party" is defined in 5 U.S.C. 551(3). The applicant must show by clear and convincing evidence that it meets all conditions of eligibility set out in this subpart and in subpart B and must submit additional information to verify its eligibility upon order by the adjudicative officer.

(b) The types of eligible applicants are as follows:

(1) An individual with a net worth of not more than \$2 million;

(2) The sole owner of an unincorporated business who has a net worth of not more than \$7 million, including both personal and business interests, and not more than 500 employees;

(3) A charitable or other tax-exempt organization described in section 501(c)(3) of the Internal Revenue Code (26 U.S.C. 501(c)(3)) with not more than 500 employees;

(4) A cooperative association as defined in section 15(a) of the Agricultural Marketing Act (12 U.S.C. 1141j(a)) with not more than 500 employees; and

(5) Any other partnerships, corporation, association, unit of local government, or organization with a net worth of not more than \$7 million and not more than 500 employees.

(c) For the purposes of eligibility, the net worth and number of employees of an applicant shall be determined as of the date the proceeding was initiated, which in proceedings before the Board of Contract Appeals is the date the applicant files its appeal to the Board.

(d) An applicant who owns an unincorporated business will be considered as an "individual" rather than a "sole owner of an unincorporated business" if the issues on which the applicant

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prevails are related primarily to personal interests rather than to business interests.

(e) The employees of an applicant include all persons who regularly perform services for remuneration for the applicant, under the applicant's direction and control. Part-time employees shall be included on a proportional basis.

(f) The net worth and number of employees of the applicant and all of its affiliates shall be aggregated to determine eligibility. Any individual, corporation or other entity that directly or indirectly controls or owns a majority of the voting shares or other interest of the applicant, or any corporation or other entity of which the applicant directly or indirectly owns or controls a majority of the voting shares or other interest, will be considered an affiliate for purposes of this part, unless the adjudicative officer determines that such treatment would be unjust and contrary to the purposes of the Act in light of the actual relationship between the affiliated entities. In addition, the adjudicative officer may determine that financial relationships of the applicant other than those described in this paragraph constitute special circumstances that would make an award unjust.

(g) An applicant that participates in a proceeding primarily on behalf of one or more other persons or entities that would be ineligible is not itself eligible for an award.

[46 FR 45945, Sept. 16, 1981, as amended at 52 FR 6798, Mar. 5, 1987]

## § 960.5 Standards for awards.

(a) A prevailing applicant may receive an award for fees and expenses incurred in connection with a proceeding, including expenses and fees incurred in filing for an award under the Act, or in a significant and discrete substantive portion of the proceeding, unless the position of the agency over which the applicant has prevailed was substantially justified. The position of the agency includes in addition to the position taken by the agency in the adversary adjudication, the action or failure to act by the agency upon which the adversary adjudication is based. The burden of proof that an award should

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not be made to an eligible prevailing applicant is on Postal Service counsel.

(b) An award will be reduced or denied if the applicant has unduly or unreasonably protracted the proceeding or if special circumstances make the award sought unjust.

[46 FR 45945, Sept. 16, 1981, as amended at 52 FR 6798, Mar. 5, 1987]

## § 960.6 Allowable fees and expenses.

(a) Awards will be based on rates customarily charged by persons engaged in the business of acting as attorneys, agents and expert witnesses, even if the services were made available without charge or at a reduced rate to the applicant. Attorney fees may not be recovered by parties appearing *pro se* in postal proceedings.

(b) No award for the fee of an attorney or agent under these rules may exceed \$125.00 per hour, or such rate as prescribed by 5 U.S.C. 504. No award to compensate an expert witness may exceed the highest rate at which the Postal Service pays expert witnesses. However, an award may also include the reasonable expenses of the attorney, agent, or witness as a separate item, if the attorney, agent or witness ordinarily charges clients separately for such expenses.

(c) In determining the reasonableness of the fee sought for an attorney, agent or expert witness, the adjudicative officer shall consider the following:

(1) If the attorney, agent or witness is in private practice, his or her customary fee for similar services, or, if an employee of the applicant, the fully allocated cost of the services;

(2) The prevailing rate for similar services in the community in which the attorney, agent or witness ordinarily performs services;

(3) The time actually spent in the representation of the applicant;

(4) The time reasonably spent in light of the difficulty or complexity of the issues in the proceeding; and

(5) Such other factors as may bear on the value of the services provided.

(d) The reasonable cost of any study, analysis, engineering report, test, project or similar matter prepared on behalf of a party may be awarded, to the extent that the charge for the service does not exceed the prevailing rate

for similar services, and the study or other matter was necessary for preparation of the applicant's case.

[46 FR 45945, Sept. 16, 1981, as amended at 52 FR 6798, Mar. 5, 1987; 66 FR 55577, Nov. 2, 2001]

**§ 960.7 Rulemaking on maximum rates for attorney fees.**

(a) If warranted by an increase in the cost of living or by special circumstances (such as limited availability of attorneys qualified to handle certain types of proceedings), the Postal Service may adopt regulations providing that attorney fees may be awarded at a rate higher than \$125.00 per hour, or such rate as prescribed by 5 U.S.C. 504, in some or all of the types of proceedings covered by this part. The Postal Service will conduct any rulemaking proceedings for this purpose under the informal rulemaking procedures of the Administrative Procedure Act.

(b) Any person may request the Postal Service to initiate a rulemaking proceeding to increase the maximum rate for attorney fees. The request should identify the rate the person believes the Postal Service should establish and the types of proceedings in which the rate should be used. It should also explain fully the reasons why the higher rate is warranted. The Postal Service will respond to the request within 60 days after it is filed, by determining to initiate a rulemaking proceeding, denying the request, or taking other appropriate action.

[46 FR 45945, Sept. 16, 1981, as amended at 66 FR 55577, Nov. 2, 2001]

**§ 960.8 Official authorized to take final action under the Act.**

The Postal Service official who renders the final agency decision in a proceeding under § 952.26 or § 953.15, or the panel that renders the decision in an appeal before the Board of Contract Appeals under part 955 procedures, as the case may be, is authorized to take final action on matters pertaining to the Equal Access to Justice Act as applied to the proceeding.

[52 FR 6798, Mar. 5, 1987]

**Subpart B—Information Required From Applicants**

**§ 960.9 Contents of application.**

(a) An application for an award of fees and expenses under the Act shall identify the applicant and the proceeding for which an award is sought. The application shall show that the applicant has prevailed and identify the position of the Postal Service in the proceeding that the applicant alleges was not substantially justified. Unless the applicant is an individual, the application shall also state the number of employees of the applicant and describe briefly the type and purpose of its organization or business.

(b) The application shall also include a statement that the applicant's net worth does not exceed \$2 million (if an individual) or \$7 million (for all other applicants, including their affiliates.) However, an applicant may omit this statement if:

(1) It attaches a copy of a ruling by the Internal Revenue Service that it qualifies as an organization described in section 501(c)(3) of the Internal Revenue Code (26 U.S.C. 501(c)(3)) or, in the case of a tax-exempt organization not required to obtain a ruling from the Internal Revenue Service on its exempt status, a statement that describes the basis for the applicant's belief that it qualifies under such section; or

(2) It states on the application that it is a cooperative association as defined in section 15(a) of the Agricultural Marketing Act (12 U.S.C. 1141j(a)).

(c) The application shall state the amount of fees and expenses for which an award is sought.

(d) The application may also include any other matters that the applicant wishes the Postal Service to consider in determining whether and in what amount an award should be made.

(e) The application shall be signed by the applicant or an authorized officer or attorney of the applicant. It shall also contain or be accompanied by a written verification under oath or under penalty of perjury that the information provided in the application is true and correct.

[46 FR 45945, Sept. 16, 1981, as amended at 52 FR 6798, Mar. 5, 1987]

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### § 960.10 Net worth exhibit.

(a) Each applicant except a qualified tax-exempt organization or cooperative association must provide with its application a detailed exhibit showing the net worth of the applicant and any affiliates (as defined in § 960.4(f)) when the proceeding was initiated. The exhibit may be in any form convenient to the applicant that provides full disclosure of the applicant's and its affiliates' assets and liabilities and is sufficient to determine whether the applicant qualifies under the standards in this part. The adjudicative officer may require an applicant to file additional information to determine its eligibility for an award.

(b) Ordinarily, the net worth exhibit will be included in the public record of the proceeding. However, an applicant that objects to public disclosure of information in any portion of the exhibit and believes there are legal grounds for withholding it from disclosure may submit that portion of the exhibit directly to the adjudicative officer in a sealed envelope labeled "Confidential Financial Information", accompanied by a motion to withhold the information from public disclosure. The motion shall describe the information sought to be withheld and explain, in detail, why it falls within one or more of the specific exemptions from mandatory disclosure under the Freedom of Information Act, 5 U.S.C. 552(b) (1) through (9), why public disclosure of the information would adversely affect the applicant, and why disclosure is not required in the public interest. The material in question shall be served on counsel representing the agency against which the applicant seeks an award, but need not be served on any other party to the proceeding. If the adjudicative officer finds that the information should not be withheld from disclosure, it shall be placed in the public record of the proceeding. Otherwise, any request to inspect or copy the exhibit shall be disposed of in accordance with the Postal Service's established procedures under the Freedom of Information Act, part 265 of this title.

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### § 960.11 Documentation of fees and expenses.

(a) The application shall be accompanied by full documentation of the fees and expenses, including the cost of any study, analysis, engineering report, test, project or similar matter, for which an award is sought. A separate itemized statement shall be submitted for each professional firm or individual whose services are covered by the application, showing the hours spent in connection with the proceeding by each individual, a description of the specific services performed, the rate at which each fee has been computed, any expenses for which reimbursement is sought, the total amount claimed, and the total amount paid or payable by the applicant or by any other person or entity for the services provided. The adjudicative officer may require the applicant to provide vouchers, receipts, or other substantiation for any expenses claimed. In addition, the Board of Contract Appeals may require an applicant to submit to an audit by the Postal Service of its claimed fees and expenses.

(b) Where the case has been sustained in part and denied in part or where the applicant has prevailed in only a significant and discrete substantive portion of the case, the application must be limited to fees and expenses allocable to the portion of the case as to which the applicant was the prevailing party.

[46 FR 45945, Sept. 16, 1981, as amended at 52 FR 6798, Mar. 5, 1987]

### § 960.12 When an application may be filed.

(a) An application may be filed whenever the applicant has prevailed in the proceeding or in a significant and discrete substantive portion of the proceeding, but in no case later than 30 days after the Postal Service's final disposition of the proceeding.

(b) If review or reconsideration is sought or taken of a decision as to which an applicant believes it has prevailed, proceedings for the award of fees shall be stayed pending final disposition of the underlying controversy.

(c) For purposes of this rule, final disposition means the later of (1) the date on which an initial decision or

other recommended disposition of the merits of the proceeding by an adjudicative officer or intermediate review board becomes administratively final;

(2) Issuance of an order disposing of any petitions for reconsideration of the Postal Service's final order in the proceeding;

(3) If no petition for reconsideration is filed, the last date on which such a petition could have been filed;

(4) Issuance of a final order or any other final resolution of a proceeding, such as a settlement or voluntary dismissal, which is not subject to a petition for reconsideration;

(5) In proceedings under 39 U.S.C. 3005, on the date that an Administrative Law Judge enters an order indefinitely suspending further proceedings on the basis of a compromise agreement entered into between the parties; or

(6) In proceedings before the Board of Contract Appeals, the Board of Contract Appeals decision on quantum. When the Board decides only entitlement and remands the issue of quantum to the parties, the final disposition occurs when the parties execute an agreement on quantum, or if the parties cannot agree on quantum and resubmit the quantum dispute to the Board, when the Board issues a decision on quantum.

[46 FR 45945, Sept. 16, 1981, as amended at 52 FR 6798, Mar. 5, 1987]

### Subpart C—Procedures for Considering Applications

#### § 960.13 Filing and service of documents.

Any application for an award or other pleading or document related to an application shall be filed and served on all parties to the proceeding in the same manner as other pleadings in the proceeding, except as provided in § 960.11(b) for confidential financial information.

#### § 960.14 Answer to application.

(a) Within 30 days after service of an application, counsel representing the Postal Service may file an answer to the application. Unless the Postal Service counsel requests an extension

of time for filing or files a statement of intent to negotiate under paragraph (b) of this section, failure to file an answer within the 30-day period may be treated as a consent to the award requested.

(b) If the Postal Service counsel and the applicant believe that the issues in the fee application can be settled, they may jointly file a statement of their intent to negotiate a settlement. The filing of this statement shall extend the time for filing an answer for an additional 30 days, and further extensions may be granted by the adjudicative officer upon request by Postal Service counsel and the applicant.

(c) The answer shall explain in detail any objections to the award requested and identify the facts relied on in support of the Postal Service's position. If the answer is based on any alleged facts not already in the record of the proceeding, the Postal Service shall include with the answer either supporting affidavits or a request for further proceedings under § 960.19.

#### § 960.15 Reply.

Within 15 days after service of an answer, the applicant may file a reply. If the reply is based on any alleged facts not already in the record of the proceeding, the applicant shall include with the reply either supporting affidavits or a request for further proceedings under § 960.19.

#### § 960.16 Comments by other parties.

Any party to a proceeding other than the applicant and Postal Service may file comments on an application within 30 days after it is served or on an answer within 15 days after it is served. A commenting party may not participate further in proceedings on the application unless the adjudicative officer determines that the public interest requires such participation in order to permit full exploration of matters raised in the comments.

#### § 960.17 Settlement.

The applicant and the Postal Service may agree on a proposed settlement of the award before final action on the application, either in connection with a

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settlement of the underlying proceeding, or after the underlying proceeding has been concluded. If a prevailing party and Postal Service counsel agree on a proposed settlement of an award before an application has been filed, the application shall be filed with the proposed settlement.

### § 960.18 Further proceedings.

(a) Ordinarily, the determination of an award will be made on the basis of the written record. However, on request of either the applicant or Postal Service counsel, or on his or her own initiative, the adjudicative officer may order further proceedings, such as an informal conference, oral argument, additional written submissions, or an evidentiary hearing. Such further proceedings shall be held only when necessary for full and fair resolution of the issues arising from the application, and shall be conducted as promptly as possible. Whether or not the position of the agency was substantially justified shall be determined on the basis of the entire administrative record that is made in the adversary adjudication for which fees and other expenses are sought.

(b) A request that the adjudicative officer order further proceedings under this section shall specifically identify the information sought or the disputed issues and shall explain why the additional proceedings are necessary to resolve the issues.

[46 FR 45945, Sept. 16, 1981, as amended at 52 FR 6798, Mar. 5, 1987]

### § 960.19 Decision.

(a) The adjudicative officer shall issue an initial decision on the application as promptly as possible after completion of proceedings on the application. The decision shall include written findings and conclusions on the applicant's eligibility and status as a prevailing party, and an explanation of the reasons for any difference between the amount requested and the amount awarded. The decision shall also include, if at issue, findings on whether the Postal Service's position was substantially justified, whether the applicant unduly protracted the proceedings, or whether special circumstances make an award unjust. If

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the applicant has sought an award against the Postal Service and another agency, the decision shall allocate responsibility for payment of any award made between the Postal Service and the other agency, and shall explain the reasons for the allocation made.

(b) The Board of Contract Appeals shall issue its decision on the application as promptly as possible after completion of proceedings on the application. Whenever possible, the decision shall be made by the same Administrative Judge or panel that decided the contract appeal for which fees are sought. The decision shall be in the format described in paragraph (a) of this section.

[46 FR 45945, Sept. 16, 1981, as amended at 52 FR 6798, Mar. 5, 1987]

### § 960.20 Further Postal Service review.

(a) Either the applicant or Postal Service counsel may seek review of the initial decision on the fee application, in accordance with § 952.25 or § 953.14. If neither the applicant nor the Postal Service counsel seeks review, the initial decision on the application shall become a final decision of the Postal Service 30 days after it is issued. If review is taken, the Judicial Officer will issue a final decision on the application or remand the application to the adjudicative officer for further proceedings.

(b) In Board of Contract Appeals proceedings, either party may seek reconsideration of the decision on the fee application in accordance with the procedures in 39 CFR part 955.

[46 FR 45945, Sept. 16, 1981, as amended at 52 FR 6798, Mar. 5, 1987; 90 FR 25501, June 17, 2025]

### § 960.21 Judicial review.

A party other than the Postal Service may, within 30 days after a determination on the award is made, appeal the determination to the court of the United States having jurisdiction to review the merits of the underlying decision of the agency adversary adjudication in accordance with 5 U.S.C. 504(c)(2).

[52 FR 6799, Mar. 5, 1987]

## United States Postal Service

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### § 960.22 Payment of award.

An applicant seeking payment of an award shall submit to the Judicial Officer a copy of the Postal Service's final decision granting the award, accompanied by a statement that the applicant will not seek review of the decision in the United States courts. Requests for payment should be sent to: Judicial Officer, 2101 Wilson Boulevard, Suite 600, Arlington, VA 22201-3078. The Judicial Officer shall submit certification for payment to the Postal Data Center. The Postal Service will pay the amount awarded to the applicant within 60 days, unless judicial review of the award or of the underlying decision of the adversary adjudication has been sought by the applicant or any other party to the proceeding.

[46 FR 45945, Sept. 16, 1981, as amended at 63 FR 66052, Dec. 1, 1998]

## PART 961—DEBT COLLECTION ACT PROCEEDINGS AGAINST CURRENT EMPLOYEES

Sec.

- 961.1 (Rule 1) Authority for rules in this part.
- 961.2 (Rule 2) Scope of rules in this part.
- 961.3 (Rule 3) Definitions.
- 961.4 (Rule 4) Employee petition for a hearing.
- 961.5 (Rule 5) Effect of filing a petition.
- 961.6 (Rule 6) Filing, docketing, and serving documents; computation of time; representation of parties.
- 961.7 (Rule 7) Answer to petition.
- 961.8 (Rule 8) Hearing Official's authority and responsibilities.
- 961.9 (Rule 9) Oral hearing or submission on the written record.
- 961.10 (Rule 10) Effect of Hearing Official's decision; motion for reconsideration.
- 961.11 (Rule 11) Consequences for failure to comply with rules in this part.
- 961.12 (Rule 12) Ex parte communications.

AUTHORITY: 39 U.S.C. 204, 401; 5 U.S.C. 5514.

SOURCE: 90 FR 9220, Feb. 10, 2025, unless otherwise noted.

### § 961.1 (Rule 1) Authority for rules in this part.

This part is issued by the Judicial Officer under authority delegated by the Postmaster General.

### § 961.2 (Rule 2) Scope of rules in this part.

This part applies to:

(a) The hearing provided by section 5 of the Debt Collection Act of 1982, as amended, 5 U.S.C. 5514, and in accordance with the Employee and Labor Relations Manual, sections 450 and 460, challenging the existence, amount, or the repayment schedule of an employee debt to the Postal Service; or

(b) A hearing under section 5 of the Debt Collection Act when the Judicial Officer Department adjudicates a petition for a creditor agency under an agreement between the Postal Service and that agency. In such cases, all references to Postal Service in this part will be construed to refer to the creditor agency.

### § 961.3 (Rule 3) Definitions.

As used in this part:

(a) *Employee*. A current Postal Service employee who is alleged to be indebted to the Postal Service.

(b) *General Counsel*. The General Counsel of the Postal Service or the General Counsel's designee.

(c) *Hearing Official*. (1) An Administrative Law Judge qualified to hear cases under the Administrative Procedure Act;

(2) An Administrative Judge appointed under the Contract Disputes Act of 1978, as amended; or

(3) Any other qualified person who is not under the control or supervision of the Postmaster General and is designated by the Judicial Officer to conduct the hearing.

(d) *Judicial Officer*. The Judicial Officer, Associate Judicial Officer, or Acting Judicial Officer of the Postal Service.

(e) *Notice of involuntary administrative salary offset*. The formal written notice required by section 5 of the Debt Collection Act, including the provision of notice of the procedures under this part, before involuntary offset may be taken from an employee's salary.

(f) *Days*. Calendar days.

(g) *Recorder*. The Recorder, Judicial Officer Department, United States Postal Service, located at 2101 Wilson Boulevard, Suite 600, Arlington, VA 22201-3078. The Recorder's telephone