

The struggle of joint and back pain for letter carriers



**Stephanie
Stewart**

Today I want to talk about the true and real struggle for many letter carriers—back and joint pain. If you are reading this article or listening to the podcast, I am sure that most of you can pinpoint that discomfort, the ache or pain I’m referring to. Unfortunately, it is a reality far too common in our ranks. A tremendous daily amount of strain is placed on our back, shoulders, knees and muscles in general, just from doing our jobs—from the repetitive movements while casing mail, the physical aspect of loading or moving heavy packages, the carrying of a heavy

satchel, to the walking of countless miles.

Knowing this, my goal is not to leave you with a discouraging feeling, but rather to bring awareness about a comprehensive solution offered by the NALC Health Benefit Plan. Since 2022, we have offered a musculoskeletal (MSK) program through Hinge Health. The Hinge program has reported amazing results for our membership, and I want to encourage more of you to take advantage of this benefit.

Hinge is a digital physical therapy option that offers our members the flexibility they need when time is limited. Wait, did I mention the cost? This program is absolutely free to our members.

Whether the issue involves a recent injury, the overcoming of pain or preparation for surgery, the program is designed for each individual patient who signs up. And, depending on the treatment needed, this program offers access to physicians, physical therapists and health coaches. Based on the intake form that needs to be completed at registration, members will be placed in one of the following:

- **Wellness/prevention** is a step geared toward members interested in stretching, education and general well-being. Exercises are job-specific, so someone with a physically demanding job will have a different approach than someone with a desk job.
- **Acute** is a plan that treats recent injuries; for example, sprained ankles and soft tissue injuries. Members can download the Hinge Health app to a personal device and schedule face-to-face visits with a doctor of physi-

cal therapy. The physical therapist then might design an exercise therapy program geared to help treat that specific ailment. Enrollees also will receive education and continued support from a health coach.

- **Chronic** treats members who have persistent (12 weeks or longer) pain in five critical areas: back, knee, hip, shoulder or neck. Members can download the Hinge Health app to their own device or Hinge will ship a tablet to them, and with either option, they will receive sensors to help track their movements while performing the exercise therapy sessions. The chronic program also includes a care team consisting of a physical therapist and health coach to provide motivation and support, which holds the patient accountable for the best results
- **Surgery** is for members needing MSK-related surgery. A physical therapist designs a pre- and post-surgical rehab program, which the member’s surgeon reviews and approves before providing it to the member. Subsequently, updates are provided to the surgeon as the member progresses through each phase of the rehab. Like the chronic program, this comes with sensors to track movement, and a member can either download the app or choose to receive a tablet.

If you would like to enroll or just speak to someone about the details, you can call 855-902-2777 or visit hingehealth.com/nalc.

The NALC Health Benefit Plan continues to grow, and it works hard to be the best health plan option for all letter carriers. Although the 2024 Open Season numbers will not be finalized until later this month, here are some 2023 year-end statics I’d like to share.

In 2023, our Customer Service Department answered more than 864,000 calls. The plan also mailed 5.5 million-plus pieces of mail or packages and spent more than \$3.4 million in postage.

In closing, I would like to take a moment to recognize Cleveland, OH Branch 40 for helping the Plan accomplish health initiatives in the Cleveland area. A special thank-you goes to President Erick Poston, Health Benefit Representative Patrice Ashley and all other branch officers whose assistance was paramount to our success. Your hard work did not go unnoticed, and we truly appreciate the effort that everyone contributed.

The Plan is excited to educate and encourage individuals to take time for their health, and we plan to continue expanding health initiatives to many other areas. Stay tuned as we work together building a healthier future.