# U.S. Postal Service installing new mailboxes to combat mail fishing

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Thieves have targeted Fort Lee’s mailboxes at least three times in the past year.

The latest theft was in February, when a pair of 19-year-olds allegedly opened the pull-down handle of a mailbox on 15th Street and lowered a glue trap on a shoelace to fish out its contents. They were found illegally parked near the collection box with fraudulent credit cards, checks and bank receipts.

The same scheme would not have worked on the mailboxes in front of the post office on Main Street. Those collection boxes have been retrofitted with a new letter-size mail slot that makes so-called "mail fishing" much more difficult.

Since late 2016, the U.S. Postal Service has been replacing or retrofitting thousands of mailboxes throughout the northeast to combat a surge in mail theft involving string and glue contraptions.

“As the deployment progresses, northern New Jersey consumers will notice a difference with the way mail is deposited into the security enhanced boxes,” said George Flood, a Postal Service spokesman. “The new collection boxes demonstrate our commitment to the safety and security of the mail.”

The mailboxes are equipped with a mechanism that grabs a letter once its inserted and have other security enhancements that Greg Kliemisch, postal inspector for the Newark division of the U.S. Postal Inspection Service, would not disclose.

**This new mailbox, in front of the Ridgewood Post Office, prevents "mail fishing", as it only has a thin slot for envelopes, as opposed to the pull down door, which gives thieves easier access. Wednesday, April, 3, 2019***(Photo: Kevin R. Wexler/NorthJersey.com)*

All 7,000 mailboxes in New York City are being retrofitted or replaced, along with collection boxes in other parts of New York, New Jersey, Connecticut and Massachusetts. Kliemisch and Flood declined to say how many mailboxes have been revamped in New Jersey or provide an installation schedule but noted that some of the new boxes have been placed in Fort Lee, Ridgewood, Paterson and Newark.

Ridgewood was hit with three mailbox thefts on one day in December, while Paterson and Newark have grappled with missing mail for years. In most cases of mail fishing, suspects lower bottles slathered with glue used on traps for insects and mice into a mailbox opening. String is tied to the bottlenecks to reel the mail out.

In Paterson, suspects have been known to slather the inside of a pull-down flap with glue to make envelopes stick immediately, said Jerry Speziale, the city’s police director.

Police in towns throughout the state have reported cases of stolen checks, gift cards, cash and personal documents.

Two Paterson residents were arrested in January for depositing checks they allegedly stole from a mailbox. Last April, two people were arrested for allegedly stealing more than $100,000 in checks, many of them tax payments, from mailboxes in Glen Ridge. Mailboxes have also been pilfered in at least a dozen other North Jersey municipalities, including Bloomfield, Englewood, Fair Lawn, Glen Rock, Oakland, Oradell, and Woodland Park.

The wave of thefts began in the Bronx in 2016, quickly spread to the other four New York City boroughs and then moved into New Jersey, said Kliemisch. The crimes are now the focus of a federal investigation.

Kliemisch said a combination of public education and upgraded mailboxes has helped stem the problem. The Postal Service has urged customers to not make any deposits into collection boxes after the last pick-up time of the day to prevent mail from sitting in the box overnight.

“Those two combinations have proven to be very useful,” said Kliemisch. “We’ve noticed a large decrease in mail theft in those areas where the mailboxes have been installed.”

Speziale has not seen the new collection boxes but said the new design is a foolproof way to stop mail fishing.

“It’s a new way to thwart that crime,” he said. “This has been a common problem for many, many years.”

If you think you were a victim of fraud, identity theft or another mail-related crime, report it at postalinspectors.uspis.gov, or call 877-876-2455.