

Harms are real for federal workers, contractors during current government shutdown

by **Rick Goodman**

I want to address this topic from both a personal standpoint and from the larger perspective.

First, the personal. As a long-time federal manager (I recently retired), based on my experience I can tell you that for the last week or more thousands of federal workers and support contractors have had stressful conversations with their bosses. In the past I have counseled employees as they outlined their dire circumstances if a shutdown occurred. This was very difficult to do, as I had nothing to offer them but my willingness to listen.

Right now for this shutdown, a leading government employee advocate stated that the median federal worker has an average balance to cover just eight days of average spending. So the stress and worry I saw in my employees' eyes during the last shutdown is still there and in the eyes of thousands of other federal workers and support contractors.

Also on the personal level, the statement that the employees will eventually get paid does not help you when you are living from check to check. Employees are now asking their landlords for grace periods, are likely calling their credit card companies, and are also watching the news and hoping they don't have to incur any unexpected bills anytime soon.

Support contractors fare even worse than federal employees. They only get paid when they work, but during a shutdown they don't work, and their companies cannot bill the federal government. Here is how a federal employee union representative describes the impact on janitors, security guards and food service workers.

Héctor Figueroa, president of the labor union 32BJ SEIU, stated that the shutdown would once again affect thousands of janitors, security guards and cafeteria workers at government buildings across the country.

"32BJ SEIU members diligently clean and secure federal buildings from the Statue of Liberty to the Smithsonian Museums," Figueroa wrote in a recent statement. "Members like Eddie Rivera, a security officer at the Statue of Liberty, will lose his only means of support for his six children."¹

That is the personal level with which I was very familiar, and even now as I watch this from retirement, I regret this unnecessary stress that employees and contractors are experiencing. Even when the shutdown is over, the lowest paid support contractors will be missing those paychecks, and for some of them this will put them into a financial hole.

¹ <https://www.vox.com/policy-and-politics/2018/1/19/16907138/government-shutdown-2018>

Second, the broader picture. My former agency, Health and Human Services, was already funded for this fiscal year. But there are many other departments and agencies that are not funded, and thus shutdown. While we are still early in this shutdown, here are some likely impacts on marginal folks due to the shutdown of certain agencies, principally USDA and HUD:

- 1) U.S. housing authorities are expected to see significant delays in loan processing and approvals. This will impact the living situation of thousands of people².
- 2) If the shutdown continues, the school lunch program and food stamps will be impacted. Usually these programs can continue for about a month, then without new appropriations, there would be reductions³.
- 3) Agriculture assistance: USDA offices that offer loans to farmers were able to stay open for the first six days of the shutdown by using leftover funding. But offices across the country will now close. Starting Jan. 1, USDA won't be able to issue new loans for rural development or grants for housing, community facilities and utility companies⁴

Clearly, federal workers and support contractors (food service workers, janitors, guards) in the impacted agencies will be immediately hurt by this shutdown. The thousands and thousands of people who count on federal services, from school lunches, to housing vouchers, to rural loans, will also be hurt if this continues further into January.

Not surprisingly, the Pentagon stays open and funded.

Can we, Alliance of Baptists, advocate for a more robust social safety net that stays open and funded? Can we advocate that government operations that affect so many people should never be used as a bargaining chip for proposals such as the current administration's focus on building a wall?

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² <https://www.cnbc.com/2018/12/21/what-happens-if-government-shuts-down.html>

³ <https://www.vox.com/policy-and-politics/2018/1/19/16907138/government-shutdown-2018>

⁴ <https://www.politico.com/story/2019/01/01/how-the-shutdown-is-reaching-a-breaking-point-1053885>