

Government Shutdown Leaves Workers Reeling: ‘We Seem to Be Pawns’



A maintenance worker arranged barriers outside the Capitol on Thursday morning before members of the 116th Congress were sworn in. CreditCreditSarah Silbiger/The New York Times

By Campbell Robertson, Mitch Smith and Alan Blinder

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No sooner had the news of an impasse come out of a meeting room in Washington than thousands of miles away, on an island in the Pacific, Tomas Kaselionis had to start making decisions.

“For me, it’s do I consider a car payment or do I pay the gas bill or the phone bill?” said Mr. Kaselionis, who is working on typhoon recovery for the Federal Emergency Management Agency, unpaid and far from home in the United States commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands. “Those are conversations within the next week that I have to have with my wife.”

By Saturday, the federal government will have been shut down for two weeks, a full pay cycle for federal workers. If the shutdown lasts through Monday, it will surpass the one of 2013, and if it lasts beyond the following Saturday, it will be the longest shutdown in United States history. Politicians have said they were hopeful that the standoff could be over in a matter of “days and weeks,” a reassurance that rang hollow to hundreds of thousands of federal workers who were not getting paid.

“They have to realize that this affects everyday people,” said Ray Coleman Jr., a corrections officer who teaches G.E.D. classes at a federal prison in Florida and is

president of his local union. “It affects the boots on the ground. To me, it’s like a political chess game that they’re playing, and we seem to be pawns.”

By Thursday, fallout from the shutdown was spreading fast. The chairman of the Federal Communications Commission announced on Twitter that the agency would “suspend most operations.”

Federal court proceedings, to the [irritation](#) of judges, slowed as government lawyers asked for stays. The Justice Department asked to delay a hearing on a suit brought by the N.A.A.C.P. over the Trump administration’s census preparations. And a much-anticipated E.P.A. [hearing](#) on lead contamination in East Chicago, Ind., was canceled.

All the while, claims for unemployment benefits were piling up; the District of Columbia said it had received about 900 claims connected to the shutdown, and the state of Maryland counted 637 at midweek. More than 350 federal workers in Colorado had filed unemployment claims.

Daniel A. Sobien, a meteorologist with the National Weather Service in Tampa, Fla., who has been furloughed and is living on savings, said that federal workers are “tired of being political pawns.”

“I realize that unfair things happen to people all the time,” he said, “but it really is unfair that because of politics, government employees have to shoulder the burden.”

The impasse may be centered within a few blocks in Washington, D.C., but the federal work force shouldering the burden is spread across the country — fewer than one in five federal workers are in the Washington statistical area. Among the 800,000 federal workers affected are people with doctorates earning \$100,000 a year and those making a quarter of that; workers in labs and workers in prisons; people who clean up majestic national parks and people who clean up cramped offices in the early morning hours.

Among these workers, there was a widely shared sentiment of frustration, even disgust, that the people in charge seemed to lack concern for the people who actually keep the government working.

“It’s indefensible to not appreciate the role and responsibility that there is to make sure the government runs smoothly,” said A. Ashley Tabaddor, a federal immigration judge in Los Angeles and president of the National Association of Immigration Judges, who is currently on furlough.

Brian Turner, an officer with the Transportation Security Administration at the Philadelphia airport, said he has for six years enjoyed being “the last line of defense” for people getting on airplanes. He endured a 16-day shutdown in 2013, but at the time did not have a house or a family, and the politics back then, as fierce as they were, just seemed more predictable, he said.



Daniel A. Sobien, a meteorologist with the National Weather Service in Tampa, Fla. “I realize that unfair things happen to people all the time, but it really is unfair that because of politics, government employees have to shoulder the burden,” he said. Credit Eve Edelheit for The New York Times

“I love working for the country,” he said. But, he added, “I can’t go two months without a paycheck.”

About 420,000 of the workers affected are classified as essential and have been working without knowing when they will next be paid. About 380,000 federal workers have been furloughed. Unions and federal agencies have not provided demographic information about the workers affected, but have said that the group is generally similar to the broader federal work force, some 2.1 million nonmilitary workers.

The work force is spread out nationally, with thousands of federal employees in every state, tens of thousands in states like Georgia, Pennsylvania and Oklahoma, and the highest percentage in California. According to officials at unions which represent federal employees, the shutdown seemed to be affecting workers outside of the Washington, D.C. area most severely.

Less-populated areas may be hit disproportionately hard, including small towns such as Pollock, La., where the biggest employer is a federal penitentiary.

“Our members get an average take-home pay of \$500 a week, and next week they aren’t going to get that,” said J. David Cox Sr., president of the American Federation of Government Employees, which represents about 40,000 Bureau of Prisons employees who have been furloughed in the shutdown. “The places that are getting slammed are the ones, like Pollock, that you can’t find with a GPS.”

In addition to the federal workers, thousands of people who work for contractors — cleaning offices or serving food — are missing wages, but are not considered in proposed legislation that promises back pay once a deal is worked out.

“Just to think about it, it’s so frightening,” said Donna Kelly, a contracted security guard who works — or did work, before the museums closed on Wednesday — at the

Smithsonian Institution. She had applied for unemployment benefits, but was still waiting for her application to be processed. “I really don’t know what I’ll do until I’m actually feeling the pressure.”

Nearly all of those affected, the contractors, furloughed employees and employees who were working without pay, were experiencing a growing, gnawing anxiety. They were keeping track of the news: Mr. Trump’s demands for a border wall, the daily shifts over terms of an imaginable deal, the vows by Democrats and Republicans not to budge. But many said they were doing so simply to find out if they could pay mortgages, plan vacations or take care of car payments.

“I don’t think anybody who works for the government is worried about if this wall gets built or not,” said La-Shanda Palmer, a T.S.A. employee in Philadelphia. “They want to go back to work.” She was concerned about paying her bills and racking up late fees, and providing for her family. She said she called her utility company hoping for an accommodation; she did not get a break.

“Right now, the stress level is at 1,000,” said Kutonya King, a correctional counselor at the federal prison in Jesup, Ga. Like other corrections officers, Ms. King said she was concerned about the safety of the inmates and of her fellow workers, who will have more and more to occupy their minds if the shutdown drags on. An officer at another prison wondered how many of her colleagues would end up staying home because they could not afford gas.

Still, Ms. King said some inmates had offered sympathy. That seemed to be more than workers were hearing from Washington.

“I don’t particularly blame a particular party; I think it’s across the board,” Ms. King said. “They need to think about the people.”

Ms. King has been making plans in case the shutdown lasts the promised days and weeks, having already canceled a long-planned family trip for the holidays. She may need that money to pay bills, she said.

Later on Thursday afternoon, back in Washington, a key Republican senator suggested to reporters a new possible timeline for the shutdown: “[months and months](#).”

Glenn Thrush and Kirk Johnson contributed reporting. Doris Burke contributed research.

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