

Federal workers fearful of future as Trump shutdown becomes longest in American history

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EPA employee Rosanne Sawaya-O'Brien holds her sign during a rally and protest by government workers and concerned citizens against the government shutdown on Friday at Post Office Square near the Federal building, headquarters for the EPA and IRS in Boston. (Joseph Prezioso / AFP / Getty Images)

It's a record.

President Trump's refusal to reopen the government without taxpayer cash for his long-promised border wall took a harsh toll on thousands of federal workers Friday, as payday came and went without compensation.

Some 800,000 furloughed federal employees — either forced to work for free or told to stay home — were deprived of their paychecks because of the shutdown, which at 22 days becomes the longest ever Saturday, beating the previous 21-day stretch set in 1995.

Fuming workers posted pictures of \$0 pay stubs on social media, lashed out at the deadlock in Washington and began looking for alternative ways to keep up with bills, mortgage payments and rent.

But Trump appeared unmoved by their plight, signaled the shutdown won't end anytime soon and floated a new sugarcoated name for the wall as an olive branch to Democrats. "Whatever you want to call it, it's OK with me. They can name it peaches, I don't care what they name it, but we need money," Trump told reporters of the border project he spent the entire 2016 campaign promising Mexico would pay for.

Despite Trump's label riff, Democrats are unanimously against building a wall because they consider the very concept immoral, unnecessarily expensive and ineffective.

The President, who wants at least \$5.7 billion for a wall, tamped down speculation he may declare a national emergency and get cash for his coveted wall that way — at least for now.

"We want Congress to do its job," he said. "What we're not looking to do right now is national emergency."

While the President played politics in the capital, Thomas Schoregge, a union representative for the American Federation of Government Employees Local 2222, said Transportation Security Administration agents working at New York City area airports have taken second jobs to make ends meet.

"It's scary because it has lasted so long and people don't see any end in sight," Schoregge, 39, said.

Schoregge said some of his colleagues have started driving for car companies like Uber and Lyft when not screening passengers preparing to board flights.

Many federal workers live paycheck to paycheck, with the typical employee making about \$37 an hour, which translates into \$1,480 a week, according to Labor Department data. That's nearly \$1.2 billion in lost pay each week, when multiplied by 800,000 workers.

With the shutdown looming, Facebook pages have popped up for people to buy items from furloughed federal workers while many of those affected are scaling back spending, canceling trips, applying for unemployment benefits and taking out loans to stay afloat.

Transportation Security Administration officers work at a checkpoint at O'Hare Airport in Chicago on Friday, as the government shutdown likely stretches on to become the longest in American history. (Nam Y. Huh / AP)

Rachael Weatherly, a senior adviser for the Federal Emergency Management Agency, said she's considering getting a job at a grocery store, as she can't afford missing one paycheck.

"I filed for unemployment. I'm waiting for that to come through," the Maryland resident said. "I just don't see how this is going to end."

At the main Justice Department in Washington, the Daily News has learned employees deemed essential are working upwards of 20 hours per day without pay to cover for colleagues who are out on furlough. Some teams comprising about 20 people are down to four or five as a result, leaving the remaining employees scrambling to keep operations running.

A similar situation has unfolded at the State Department, with diplomatic brass working long shifts without being able to collect overtime because of their tenured status, according to Sunny Blaylock, the wife of a senior official.

Blaylock, herself a federal tech contractor who has gone without pay since the shutdown began Dec. 22, told The News that her hubby has even debated getting out of public service because of the shutdown.

"He loves his job," Blaylock said, "but you have to discuss whether he has to get out of this line of work when the leader of the federal government says this can go on for months or even years."

Ashley Tabbador, an immigration judge in Los Angeles and the president of the National Association of Immigration Judges, said she feels fortunate in that she has personal savings to hold her up through the shutdown but many of her fellow jurists are struggling.

"Our public servants are the ones who are bearing the actual economic and emotional costs of all this," Tabbador said. "Some of our judges have been asking about applying for unemployment and another judge is applying to put in a loan to meet his mortgage because otherwise he wouldn't be able to."

The previous shutdown record was set by a budget spat in December 1995 and January 1996 involving President Bill Clinton and House Speaker Newt Gingrich.

The current impasse showed no sign of coming to a close as the Senate and House adjourned until Monday.

The Democratically controlled House approved legislation that would fund the Interior Department, Environmental Protection Agency and National Forest Service in a 240-179

vote Friday. But the bills are mostly symbolic, as Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell (R-Ky.) says he won't put anything up for a vote that Trump won't commit to signing.

McConnell has stayed out of the spotlight this week and his office has not returned several requests for comment.

"Mitch is in hiding," a congressional aide said. "He's doing no press and answering no questions, refusing to talk to Democrats until he gets his orders from the President. He is totally declawed."

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