

Minnesota state government shuts down in budget crisis

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4 July 2011

The Minnesota state government shut down many of its operations on Friday after legislators failed to come to an agreement on fiscal matters. Some 22,000 state employees have been laid off for the foreseeable future.

Many services have closed operations, including child-care subsidies, services for the blind and elderly, criminal background checks, state parks and rest areas, the state's education department, 26 historical sites and museums, licensing for hunting and fishing, and driver and vehicle services.

Minnesota is the only government to shut down as state governments entered the 2011-12 fiscal year July 1. The state shut down a limited amount of services for a short time in 2005, but the scope of the current stoppage is the largest in Minnesota's history.

The distribution of federal food commodities to food banks will cease. According to one report, this means that close to one million pounds of food that is already in Minnesota warehouses will not be delivered during the shutdown.

On Friday, social service advocates and public aid recipients testified before a hearing called to define which programs are "essential to life, health, and public safety." Homeless shelters and non-profits assisting battered women, the disabled and others put forth pleas for continued funding. One patient at a state-supported mental health nonprofit said, "I'm afraid something so necessary for my life could be considered optional."

Sonya Mills, a mother of eight, told the *St. Paul Pioneer Press* that she faced the loss of state child care subsidies. In May, she was forced to relocate after a tornado tore through the home she was renting. "It's like you are still in the wind of the tornado," she said.

Telephone hotlines provided for seniors, deaf, and the disabled have been shut down and a voicemail machine tells callers to leave a message. This program provides

important assistance in finding housing options, with Medicaid and Medicare insurance and with other services for the most vulnerable sections of the population.

Some Department of Motor Vehicles offices remain open, but they will not be conducting driving tests throughout the state. Employees of the Department of Natural Resources will continue to enforce rules concerning hunting and fishing, but there will be no servicing of new or expired licenses. The DNR website notes that only 220 to 230 staff, out of approximately 2,500, will continue working. All DNR-managed facilities will be locked, and state parks, campgrounds, and all water, restrooms, and other facilities will be closed.

In a particularly disturbing development—four years after 13 people died and 145 were injured in the I-35W bridge collapse in Minneapolis—over 100 construction projects in the state have been halted, with the majority of construction workers laid off. Only those projects deemed "emergency repairs" will continue until an agreement is reached at the state capitol. Talks will not resume until after the holiday weekend.

Camping, fishing, swimming, and other outdoor recreation and tourist activities during the summer holiday weekend will be affected. Countless families reserve campsites months in advance to enjoy the 4th of July weekend—one of the few paid holidays for many. Campers and others enjoying the parks have been kicked out and reservations have all been cancelled.

The Minnesota Zoo was initially scheduled to be closed. In a petition to the government for temporary funding, the institution pointed out that "almost 75 percent of its funding is derived from gate admissions, concession fees, concert rentals, education fees, contributions and donations...[the Zoo] generates its

largest revenue in the summer months, and the Fourth of July weekend is one of the largest revenue producing weekends.” A judge ordered the zoo reopened Sunday.

The debate in the state legislature on how to close the state’s \$5 billion budget deficit has been raging for months. Both parties agree that the crisis should be resolved at the expense of the population, but they have been bickering over the exact terms. While Democratic Governor Mark Dayton ran on a platform of taxing the wealthy (there are 7,700 millionaires in the state), in the weeks leading up to the debate he backed off calls for tax increases and agreed to work with Republicans in cutting funding other ways.

Dayton made it clear in a newspaper article that “he has been more flexible than Republicans in trying to compromise in order to acknowledge their principles.” Over the last week, Dayton and other Democratic officials were close to an agreement with Republicans that would further delay \$700 million already owed to kindergarten through grade 12 schools. Dayton has suggested increased revenue by expanding gambling—and building a new downtown Minneapolis casino.

The Republicans have proposed drastic cuts in social spending and other attacks on the working class, including further restrictions on the right to an abortion, curtailed collective bargaining rights, new photo ID voting requirements, a ban on embryonic stem cell research, and a 15 percent reduction in the state workforce.

With the state government closed down, the tax court is closed and no tax refund checks will be dispersed. This will not, however, prevent the state from imposing increased fees for the new year and continuing to collect taxes during the shutdown.



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