

US Defense Department to furlough 650,000 civilian workers

Naomi Spencer
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US Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel on Tuesday announced plans to impose 11 days of unpaid leave for most of the Pentagon's 800,000 civilian employees beginning in July.

The reductions amount to about one day's pay lost each week through the end of the fiscal year on September 30—a pay reduction of 20 percent over the period. Workers at military bases across the country will be impacted, as will many Air Force employees and office workers in the Washington, DC, Maryland and Virginia area.

The \$85 billion sequestration order signed by Obama on March 1 is making itself felt across federal agencies and unfolding in the form of even deeper cuts at the state and local levels. Medicare, Social Security, food assistance and unemployment compensation are targeted for hundreds of billions of dollars in cuts in the coming years.

According to the military newspaper *Stars and Stripes*, the number of civilian Defense Department employees impacted may be up to 750,000. Furlough notices will be sent out beginning May 28, Hagel wrote in a memo, adding that employees would have a week to appeal against the decision.

Officials told *Stars and Stripes* that financial hardship would “not be accepted as a valid reason for appeal.” When pressed to provide an example of a valid argument for appeal, a senior defense official said, “I can't think of a reason right now.”

The total furlough has been reduced from the 14 days' leave previously slated to be imposed under the federal budget sequestration. The cutbacks are part of an estimated \$37 billion reduction in discretionary defense spending, also down from the previously projected \$42 billion in cuts to the Pentagon budget.

Nondiscretionary funding for the military is exempted from the sequester cuts, shielding the vast war machine of the US as it continues to expand its sphere of operations

in the Middle East, Asia and Africa.

Certain classes of defense workers, such as those working at docks and depots who are considered essential to military readiness, will be exempted from the furloughs. The majority of workers at Navy shipyards are civilians, including mechanics who do maintenance and repairs on nuclear ships. Contractors in war zones are also reportedly exempted from the furloughs. The Air Force has announced it will stop flying about one-third of its combat squadrons in the active forces, however, and the Navy and Marine Corps are reducing training staff.

Military families stationed at bases across the country will feel some of the hardest impact of defense spending cuts. Nearly 11,000 teachers and other school workers at bases will be furloughed. Under an earlier budget reduction, the Defense Commissary Agency will lose \$70 million in funding to its 252 base grocery stores. The commissaries, already understaffed, may be forced to close one day a week.

Together with military employees, more than 1 million government workers will be furloughed. In March, the Federal Aviation Administration announced it would close one-third of the nation's air traffic control towers and eliminate as many as 1,100 jobs. The 149 towers, run by government contract workers, were scheduled to close in June, but Congress last month approved legislation pushing the closure date back until the end of the fiscal year.

Federal education funding is being gutted. Head Start, the federally funded early childhood development program for low-income families, has been subjected to a funding cut of \$400 million, about \$150,000 per local program. The National Head Start Association estimates that at least 70,000 poor children will be excluded from the program.

Some Head Start programs have ended the school year abruptly several weeks early, leaving staff and parents in

the lurch. Other programs have begun removing children from the schools through random lotteries. Staff around the country have already been subjected to furlough days.

In Maine, the state government had already cut Head Start from \$360,000 to \$71,000 before Obama's sequester order took effect. Midcoast Maine Community Action, which administers Head Start, saw its budget plummet by \$135,000 this year, forcing the program to close in several towns. In April, the Texas Head Start program announced the closure of facilities in the towns of Baird and Ranger, putting staff out of work and leaving dozens of children without preschool. The Ozarks Area Community Action Corporation in Missouri cut 185 slots from Head Start.

The sequester imposes a \$740 million reduction in the federal Title I program, which provides financial assistance to poor school districts, and a \$644 million cut to special education assistance allocated under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act.

The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, popularly known as food stamps, is the object of a \$20 billion reduction in the omnibus Department of Agriculture funding bill currently in the House of Representatives. The Senate version of the bill proposes a \$4.1 billion cut to food stamps, an amount presented by the Democratic Party as a humane alternative. The Senate bill would result in an average cut of \$90 per month in food assistance for nearly half a million poor households nationwide.

Thousands of long-term unemployed workers have been removed from jobless benefit rolls across the US since March. In Florida, the sequester may strip up to 100,000 laid-off workers of their only financial safety net beginning this month. The maximum unemployment compensation in the state is a mere \$275 per week.

Several states are cutting the unemployment workforce in tandem with cuts to the long-term jobless benefits rolls. In Washington State, the Employment Security Department is closing employment offices and laying off 400 unemployment workers. The Idaho Department of Labor is laying off 62 people and reducing hours for other workers.

The Library of Congress, responsible for copywriting written works and collecting and preserving millions of archival materials, faces a 4 percent cut. Taken together with annual cutbacks since 2010, the Library's staff has shrunk to four-fifths of its authorized level. "Times are tough, as we every so often have to make difficult choices between nice-to-haves and must-haves," commented Representative Rodney Alexander (Republican of

Louisiana), the chairman of the appropriations committee overseeing the Library's budget.

Government jobs at the federal, state and local levels have dropped by 835,300 since 2009, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics. Over the period, the US Postal Service has cut 132,300 positions—more than one in six workers. Local schools have lost nearly 336,300 jobs, state governments have eliminated 160,300 workers, and local governments have cut 217,600.

Environmental management programs have also been subjected to reductions. The Department of Agriculture has cut 500 firefighters and eliminated 50 engines used to combat wildfires. In announcing the cuts Monday, Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack said the summer would present "above normal, significant fire potential" that "doesn't bode well" for the Western US.

Volcano observatories have been closed in Alaska, including one monitoring the Cleveland Volcano, which began erupting this week. Of nine seismic network stations monitoring such activity, four are not operational and will not be repaired under the current budget.

Agencies are preparing for even deeper cuts after September 30. The Department of Health and Human Services published draft proposals Monday on \$500 million in cuts for fiscal year 2014 and \$600 million in both 2015 and 2016. The states that do not opt into the Obama administration's Affordable Care Act are expected to bear more severe cuts to federal Medicaid funding. According to the *Wall Street Journal*, states will lose \$1.8 billion in 2017, \$5 billion in 2018, \$5.6 billion in 2019, and \$4 billion in 2020.



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