

Furloughs of civilian defense department workers begin in the US

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About 750,000 Defense Department employees in the US began receiving furlough notices Tuesday. They will take up to 11 unpaid furlough days starting July 8, amounting to a 20 percent pay cut.

These furloughs are the result of \$1.2 trillion in sequester cuts signed into law last year, with \$85 billion in cuts implemented this year. As a result of the sequester cuts, states throughout the country are slashing or eliminating vital social programs that keep millions of people out of poverty while also taking the axe to extended unemployment benefits.

The Defense Department furloughs are only the largest of furloughs across a broad range of government agencies, including the Environmental Protection Agency, the federal courts, the Department of Human Services and the Internal Revenue Service.

Even as the current year's cuts are getting started, lawmakers are already laying the groundwork for sharper cuts next year. This will include \$92 billion plus an additional \$35 billion in cuts that are deferred from last year.

This year, the cuts were implemented across every government agency, resulting in roughly equal cutbacks in every sector. Next year, however, Congress will have the leeway to direct the cuts to particular agencies.

A foretaste of next year's sequester cuts was provided by a proposal adopted by the House Appropriations Committee last week that would slash funding for major social services by over a quarter.

The committee proposed to cut spending on the departments of Labor, Education, and Health and Human Services by \$43 billion, a drop of 26 percent. While the Republican-dominated committee's proposal is unlikely to be passed wholesale, it points to the way the sequester cuts are being used by both parties to dismantle social services.

President Barack Obama, who had previously referred to the sequester cuts as "dumb" and warned of the catastrophic impact should they be implemented, has in recent weeks said next to nothing about their impact, much less calling for their overturn.

The Internal Revenue Service, Environmental Protection Agency, and Department of Housing and Urban Development shut down completely last Friday as a result of furloughs. Some 115,000 workers, or five percent of the total government workforce, were furloughed that day.

Some 4,700 Environmental Protection Agency employees have another seven furloughs days remaining this year, while the IRS will shut down for five to seven more workdays.

About two million people will have their long-term jobless benefits slashed by up to a quarter this year. The state of Illinois cut its extended unemployment payments by 16.8 percent starting May 27, while the state of Wyoming slashed its extended unemployment payments by 23 percent starting May 26. South Carolina, meanwhile, is implementing the cuts by withholding unemployment checks on specific weeks.

As the sequester cuts come into full swing, an increasing number of workers are being affected. According to an ABC News/ *Washington Post* poll released last week, 37 percent of the US population said they were directly affected by the sequester cuts, up from 25 percent in March. Of those who said the sequester cuts affected them, 18 percent said that the cuts had a "major impact."

Across the country, 70,000 children, or seven percent of all those enrolled in Head Start, the early childhood education program, will be kicked off the program by July, with many already affected.

Cancer clinics, meanwhile, have turned away

thousands of patients because Medicare cuts implemented under the program make it impossible for providers to pay for treatments. Jeff Vacirca, chief executive of North Shore Hematology Oncology Associates in New York, told the *Washington Post* that his company has been forced to turn away one third of its 16,000 Medicare patients. “A lot of us are in disbelief that this is happening,” he told the newspaper. “It’s a choice between seeing these patients and staying in business.”

Across the country, the federal government is slashing assistance to states as a result of the sequester cuts. Louisiana, for example, is seeing an 8.5 percent reduction in the amount of federal assistance it receives. The state is cutting a host of programs, including 21 percent from its children’s health insurance program.

Michigan, which is losing \$248 billion in federal funding, according to a recent report by the Economic Policy Institute, eliminated a program that gave 21,000 children throughout the state a \$137 allowance for clothes each school year.

Federal public defenders are likewise facing furloughs. For instance, defenders in the District of Columbia will be forced to take a 15-day furlough this year, amounting to a 12 percent reduction in their salary. Last month, two Washington D.C. judges noted in a column that the furlough of public defenders in the city “poses an existential threat to the right of indigent defendants to have publicly funded legal representation.”

The sequester cuts, which both parties nominally say they oppose, are the result of the bipartisan deal in 2011 to enact automatic across-the-board spending cuts that would supposedly be so disastrous that politicians would be forced to repeal them. It is now clear, however, that the cuts were intended as a way to slash social services, cut workers’ pay and drastically reduce unemployment benefits, all while paving the way for even more draconian cuts to Social Security and Medicare.



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