

US government shutdown hits social services

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Some 800,000 federal workers were sent home on unpaid leave Tuesday in the first US federal government shutdown in seventeen years. Social services were disrupted, most government regulation of corporations was halted, and national parks and monuments were closed.

The unpaid leave comes on top of furloughs announced earlier this year resulting from the so-called “sequester” budget cuts, resulting in pay reductions of up to 20 percent for some government workers. Federal workers’ pay has been frozen for three years.

Hundreds of thousands of workers prepared their workplaces for a lockdown of unknown duration Tuesday morning before leaving in the afternoon, unsure of when they would be back to work and how devastating the impact would be on their family finances.

There were no signs of a deal to end the shutdown, as the White House and Democratic lawmakers rejected moves by congressional Republicans to fund sections of the government piecemeal. The Obama administration has no inclination to find a quick resolution, seeking instead to use the government crisis as a justification for acceding to Republican demands for deeper and more rapid cuts in social spending.

The government’s shutdown plans were calculated to have the smallest possible impact on the military and the repressive apparatus of the state, while shutting down government operations that provide services to working people or regulate corporate and financial interests.

The list of government agencies to be shut down reads like a corporate wish list for deregulation. Some 91 percent of staff at the Securities and Exchange Commission is furloughed, as is 96 percent of the Commodity Futures Trading Commission.

Other regulatory agencies, including the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission, the Consumer Product

Safety Commission, the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, the National Labor Relations Board and the Environmental Protection Agency, have all received furloughs affecting over 90 percent of their employees.

Federal programs to promote culture, education and social services have been largely shuttered. The Department of Education, the National Endowment for the Humanities, the National Endowment for the Arts and the Smithsonian Institution have had almost all of their employees furloughed. National zoos and monuments, including the Lincoln, Washington and Jefferson memorials, have been blocked off.

Other government departments providing health and safety services have been partially shuttered. The Food and Drug Administration has stopped food inspection except meat, poultry and dairy. More than two-thirds of the staff at the Centers for Disease Control has been furloughed and officials say they will be unable to provide help to state and local governments in the event of a disease outbreak.

The shutdown began to have a visible effect on government regulatory activities Tuesday when the Justice Department requested that a federal court delay an antitrust lawsuit to block the merger plans of US Airways and American Airlines. The trial is scheduled to begin November 25, but Justice Department personnel said they were prohibited from working during the shutdown, impairing their ability to prepare for the trial. The judge rejected the request.

Launch preparations for NASA’s latest Mars mission, called MAVEN, have been put on hold, and the project could be scrapped if the shutdown continues. If the mission does not launch between November 18 and December 7, it will have to be pushed back at least to 2016, when the Earth and Mars are once again in the required alignment.

The Consumer Product Safety Commission, which is

facing staff furloughs of over 96 percent, will stop recalls on all but the most dangerous products. Most employees at the National Institutes of Health have been furloughed, delaying clinical trials and cancer research.

Federal buildings have been shuttered throughout the country, and workers and small business people seeking to pay back taxes or fines have been turned away, uncertain whether they will be penalized with late fees.

Low income mothers seeking information at the Department of Agriculture's WIC food assistance page Tuesday were greeted with a blank page reading: "Due to the lapse in federal government funding, this web site is not available." Some 8.9 million women and children who depend on the program for basic nutrition have been left in the lurch.

Dozens of other government web sites and media streams became unavailable, including the Census Bureau and NASA web sites. The web sites of the National Security Agency and the CIA, on the other hand, are still up and running.



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