

Shutdown punishes Native American tribes

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Native Americans across the United States have been severely impacted by the government shutdown. Most tribes overwhelmingly depend on federal funds for education, food, housing, employment, and other assistance programs.

The principle entity that oversees the 566 federally recognized tribes—almost 2 million people—is the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA), which is part of the Department of the Interior, but government agencies such as the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) and Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) interact daily with these tribes as well.

During the shutdown the BIA—which was forced to suspend without pay 2,528 employees—halted general assistance amounting to approximately \$42 million in aid to poor individuals and to groups providing foster and residential care to children and adults. About 12,400 people use these funds on a monthly basis. Other programs operated by the BIA that were suspended included federal oversight of environmental assessments and endangered species, supervision of archeological clearances, management and leasing of oil, gas, timber, and other natural resources.

Without federal employees, revenues from timber operations and natural resources ceased along with royalties from natural gas and oil. Some tribes acquire all their income from timber operations, and individuals, some 25,000, may have their royalty payments delayed.

“It shuts down jobs,” said Ron Allen, Chairman of the Jamestown S’Klallam tribe in Washington state. “They can’t administer the sales, they can’t administer the appraisals that have to go on for timber assessment. It stops everything in its tracks.”

Beyond stopping payments to workers in the timber industry, the shutdown also diverted funds normally allocated from natural resource sales to educational, healthcare, and anti-poverty programs.

Forty-one year-old Audrey Costa, a Crow and a mother of three, had been a recipient of lease payments from the BIA to help pay for utility bills and food. Beginning October 1 no payments were mailed to her. Speaking at her house, she told the *New York Times*, “We’re having such a hard time. I don’t know what I’ll do. Just tough it out I guess.”

The shutdown suspended funding of the Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations (FDPIR), which is administered by the Food and Nutrition Service (FNS), an agency of the USDA. The FDPIR program supplies benefits such as USDA Foods to low-income families living on reservations and other approved Native households living near reservations or in Oklahoma. Last year, 76,530 people qualified for this program. The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) did not alleviate the problem, because many Native people do not have easy access to government offices or approved food stores.

The Indian Health Services (IHS), an agency of the HHS, was not directly shut down because the services provided had been deemed vital, but the length of the government shutdown meant an indirect cut in funding, especially for health care related to prevention.

“In health care, you are not being preventive because of those restrictions [on funding],” said Maxine Smart, Chairwoman of the Fort McDermitt Paiute-Shoshone tribe in Nevada.

Aaron Payment, chairman of the Sault tribe of Chippewa Indians in Michigan said that HIV prevention programs had been closed as a result of the shutdown. “We’re in turmoil,” he said. “The impact here is going to be felt by the people who need the services the most.”

Another critical agency hard hit by the shutdown was the Administration for Children and Families. Its main function is to formulate grants for a multitude of programs: Child Welfare Services, Child Care, Social

Services Block Grant, Temporary Assistance for Needy Families, Refugee Programs, Community Service Block Grant, Head Start, and other social services programs.

In addition to federal furloughs, lack of federal funding forced numerous tribes to dismiss employees. The Fort Belknap Reservation in north-central Montana was forced to furlough workers, even though the existing unemployment rate hovers around 70 percent. The Crow tribe in southeastern Montana furloughed 364 workers, more than a third of its workforce, according to Crow Chairman Darrin Old Coyote. This meant suspending indefinitely home health care for the disabled and elderly, transportation services, and an irrigation project.

"It's going to get hard," said the leader of the Crow's home health care program, Shar Simpson. "We're already taking calls from people saying, 'Who's going to take care of my mom? Who's going to take care of my dad?'"

In northern California the Yurok tribe furloughed 60 of its 310 employees, closed its childcare center, and canceled emergency financial assistance for low-income and older members. The tribe already had an 80 percent unemployment rate, reported vice chairwoman Susan Masten.

The largest reservation in America, the Navajo Nation, in Arizona, New Mexico, and Utah, receives roughly two-thirds of its budget from the federal government. During the shutdown solely essential services were operational, while tribal colleges and Head Start went defunded.

All of these repercussions from the government shutdown worsen the horrific social conditions already prevailing in Native society, the result of centuries of conquest, extermination, dispossession, and oppression. It should be noted that much federal government funding to Native Americans is prescribed in treaty promises. Of course, the US government has always eviscerated or tacitly modified "treaty commitments" to suit its own interests.

During the shutdown the National Congress of American Indians (NCAI) released a statement directed at the federal government:

"The failure to come to a budget agreement threatens the capacity of tribal governments to deliver basic governmental services to their citizens. The federal

government has made treaty commitments to our people, and in return we ceded the vast lands that make up the United States. The immediate shutdown crisis poses very real threats to tribal governments and denies health, nutrition, and other basic services to the most vulnerable tribal citizens."



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