

Thomas Jefferson and Ben Franklin museums in Philadelphia closed by Trump administration hiring freeze

Douglas Lyons
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The Trump administration has enacted a hiring freeze on government agencies such as the National Park Service (NPS) and has proposed a 12 percent cut to the Department of the Interior's budget, under which the NPS functions. The freeze and threatened budget cuts have already prompted the closure of historic and cultural attractions.

Independence National Historic Park, located in historic Philadelphia, the birthplace of the United States, has been forced to close seven sites, including some prestigious places such as the Declaration House, where American Revolutionary Thomas Jefferson wrote the Declaration of Independence, exhibits at founding father Ben Franklin's home and print shop, and the house of the Polish-Lithuanian military leader, Tadeusz Kosciuszko.

Amenities near Independence Hall, including bathrooms, have been shut down because the NPS can't hire any workers to clean them. Visitors, including the elderly and children, will now be directed to bathrooms that may be located at considerable distances from the sites they are visiting.

Citing NPS sources, Bob Skiba, former president of Philadelphia Tour Guides, told Philly.com that the hiring freeze was the main cause of the closings, and that it is not yet clear whether they will be temporary or permanent.

"When a group comes to the mall, people spend an hour and a half to two hours on tours—and as a tour guide, when I bring people around, I'm not just showing them the sites. I'm telling them stories," he said. "And [now] I don't have pieces of the story available."

Local Democratic Party officials in Philadelphia have

voiced disagreements with the cuts, but offer no perspective to stop the erosion. "[W]e can't have staffing levels so low that children don't have the opportunity to learn about the founding principles that made this country great," said Lauren Hitt, speaking on behalf of the city's mayor, James Kenney. "That's just bad government."

Hitt did not mention the fact that under the Obama administration, the NPS was subjected to deep cuts, or that the Democrats at the state and local level are spearheading the attack on public education in Pennsylvania.

Nonetheless, Trump's budget proposal marks a definite escalation in the attack on public access to history and culture. It threatens the closure of museums across the US dedicated to history, the arts and sciences.

Nineteen government agencies are targeted for cuts including the National Endowment for the Arts, the National Endowment for the Humanities, the Legal Services Corporation, the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, and AmeriCorps.

The NPS is currently negotiating with the federal Office of Personnel Management and Office of Management and Budget on the implementation of the hiring freeze, which took effect on January 22 and will continue indefinitely until a long-term plan is approved cutting the size of the federal government workforce.

Excepted from the freeze are seasonal employees, who are heavily relied on by the NPS to fill positions during the busy summer months. Without full-term personnel, however, parks will still be understaffed, and some will have no other option but to close.

Those taking seasonal work with the NPS will be part

of an increasingly exploited workforce that is increasingly relied on to plug holes originally slated for full-time personnel. Even now, such employees aspiring for a full-time NPS position must often work seasonal and part-time for years and possibly decades until a position becomes available.

Speaking to CNN, Theresa Pierno, president and CEO of the National Parks Conservation Association, said a lot of parks are understaffed and though many workers are nearing retirement age, park rangers must work harder with less help.

“[A] hiring freeze only makes a bad situation worse,” Pierno said. “Parks need more people, not less, to handle record-breaking crowds heading into our parks, care for our natural resources and tackle parks’ \$12 billion infrastructure repair backlog.”

In the autumn of 2013, a budget stalemate in Washington compelled the NPS to close all national parks and lay off over 21,000 workers. The government shutdown lasted more than two weeks, inducing tens of thousands of people to postpone or cancel their vacations.

The NPS was officially created in 1916 “to conserve the scenery and the natural and historic objects and wildlife therein, and to provide for the enjoyment of the same in such manner and by such means as will leave them unimpaired for the enjoyment of future generations.”

Even as the NPS is subjected to budget cuts, hiring freezes and closures, the public’s demand for access to history, culture and the outdoors has never been higher. The agency had a record-breaking year for attendance in 2015, with 307.2 million visits to parks and historic sites nationwide.



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