

Government shutdown has devastating impact on workers in Texas

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The federal government shutdown, ongoing since October 1, has produced a disaster for workers who have been furloughed. Texas, home of the most reactionary state government in the country, has been hit hard by the shutdown. Governor Greg Abbott, a staunch supporter of the Trump administration, has done nothing to alleviate the hardship being experienced by a significant portion of the population he governs.

There are approximately 130,000 civilian federal employees in Texas, the third largest concentration in the country, behind California and Washington D.C. Another 100,000 military personnel are stationed at the 14 bases located in the state. This does not count the thousands of civilian contractors, who are also out of work.

Food banks throughout the state are preparing for an influx of people seeking assistance, both out-of-work federal employees and recipients of aid programs, such as SNAP (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program). More than 3.5 million Texas residents, about 11 percent of the population, participate in SNAP. The administrator of SNAP in the state, the Texas Health and Human Services Commission, has stated that it will not be able to issue benefits for November.

Many food banks are distributing food in locations with high concentrations of federal workers, including airports and military bases. According to Feeding Texas, a statewide network of food banks, half of all SNAP participants in Texas are under 18, and 15 percent are over the age of 60.

The Houston Food Bank, for example, has opened new distribution centers. The Houston metro area has about 50,000 federal employees. This is in addition to the approximately 425,000 households in the area that receive SNAP benefits.

In the Austin area, the Central Texas Food Bank reports that even before the shutdown, more people were using its services. This year, the organization has spent an average of \$1.3 million per month on food, an increase from last year's average of \$1.1 million per month.

Workers have reported increasingly difficult conditions. San Antonio resident Imelda Avila-Thomas, a Department of Labor employee, told the *Texas Tribune* that she has filed for unemployment benefits, applied for part-time jobs, sold some belongings and cancelled her daughter's tutoring and day care.

Those workers deemed essential are required to report to work and perform their jobs without a paycheck. This includes air traffic controllers and Transportation Security Administration (TSA) security personnel. Many of these workers have been forced to take second jobs. Air traffic controllers, who already face long hours at highly stressful jobs, have been calling in sick due to exhaustion.

Some workers have begun to resist, albeit in a very limited way. Air traffic controllers have handed out leaflets at over 20 airports. This action, coordinated by the National Air Traffic Controllers Association (NATCA), will not solve the problem and is intended to divert the discontent that workers feel into harmless channels. Still, the fact that the union called this toothless action, which it has not done during previous shutdowns, expresses an understanding by union officials that anger and opposition are mounting among its members.

While active-duty members of the military did receive paychecks on October 15 because of the reallocation of funds within the Department of Defense, there have been reports of discrepancies in paychecks, and some have apparently been paid less than expected.

The National Military Family Association reported that in a survey of 369 military families, 164 reported being underpaid on their previous paycheck. Discrepancies ranged from \$148 to around \$2,000, with the majority between \$600 and \$800. About 55 families reported not being paid at all.

Those military families who have undergone a permanent change of station have been especially hard hit. While families are reimbursed for any moves they have to make, these payments have been stopped. One family reported that it was living in a hotel because the housing inspector at the base to which it was moving to had been furloughed, preventing them from moving into base housing.

Governor Abbott has predictably repeated the Trump administration's line on the shutdown, saying that the quickest way for it to end is for Senate Democrats to approve the legislation that Trump wants. Abbott is fully aware of the grave nature of the situation yet has counseled Texans to call 2-1-1 for information on food, housing and other essential resources.

The state government has what is known as the Texas Rainy Day Fund (officially the Economic Stabilization Fund), a financial reserve intended to help manage economic downturns and maintain services during budget shortfalls. The reserve is financed by a portion of the state's oil and gas production taxes and by any surplus revenue at the end of the fiscal year. The fund is expected to reach its cap of about \$25 billion this year. Texas is also home to 73 billionaires (2.39 per 1 million people in the total population, one of the highest ratios among all states).

The Democrats, for their part, continue to do what they always do, demagogically calling on Abbott to release funds but seeking to prevent working class Texans from mobilizing against him.



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