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Hoarding Groceries Survival Strategy for Furloughed Workers

By Jim Snyder - March 21, 2013

Civilian employees of contractor Magic City Enterprises stock the commissary shelves after hours on Oct. 24, 2012 at F.E. Warren Air Force Base in Cheyenne, Wyo. A base spokesperson said each of the 1,100 civilians employed on the base could face forced furlough days amounting to about \$8,000 in lost annual income if federal sequestration measures are enacted.

Pete Randazzo already has dipped into his savings to pay his daughter's medical bills. Now another setback looms: a 20 percent reduction in pay for his job at a Navy school under federal budget cuts.

Randazzo, 51, an information technology specialist at the Naval Postgraduate School in Monterey, California, is bracing for furlough days that now may begin in May.

The Defense Department (USBODEFN), which pays Randazzo's salary, will be among the hardest hit. As many as 750,000 of its civilian employees may be required to take off at least one day a week. The Pentagon said today it would delay furlough notices until at least April 5, citing additional funding from Congress in a stopgap spending measure passed today.

"As it gets closer, the anxiety is really rising, professionally and personally," said Randazzo, whose insurance company declined to cover his daughter's condition. "What happens when somebody has to deal with a crisis? The next person who runs into this is going to have some pretty hard decisions to make."

Slideshow: Sequestration Nation: Who's Going to Feel the Cuts?

Under a 2011 budget agreement, the federal government must cut \$85 billion from discretionary spending over the last seven months of the fiscal year that ends Sept. 30 in a process known as sequestration.

Those reductions mean deferred contracts to vendors, canceled programs and shrinking monthly incomes for U.S. civilian workers. The Congressional Budget Office estimates that economic growth will be reduced by 0.6 of a percentage point and 750,000 jobs will be lost if automatic budget cuts unfold as scheduled.

Pentagon Share

Military program cuts account for about half of the amount to be reduced this year, meaning effective cuts of about 13 percent for defense programs and of 9 percent for non-defense programs, according to the White House Office of Management and Budget.

The Pentagon's greater share of the pain means Heather Barlow, 40, is now looking for work.

Barlow, a contract employee at Letterkenny Army Depot in Chambersburg, Pennsylvania, for the past three years, lost her position as a general supplies specialist on March 1, the first day of sequestration.

The Letterkenny facility helps maintain the U.S. air defense capability, providing support for the Patriot missile. With more than 3,600 workers, the depot is the largest employer in Franklin County and brings about \$250 million into the local economy annually, according to its website.

Contract Workers

In total, the Army plans to eliminate 3,100 contract and temporary jobs nationally in response to the budget cuts, Lieutenant Colonel S. Justin Platt, a Pentagon spokesman, said in an e-mail.

Barlow's husband, Chris, also works at the depot as an electronic mechanic and faces a 20 percent cut in pay, she said.

"It's a double whammy," she said. The family stocked up on groceries just in case they got in a bind due to a job loss, she said.

Gwenerver Moore, a program analyst at the Environmental Protection Agency, said in an interview that her lost hours will equal one paycheck this year, which could lead to a missed mortgage payment. Moore said she's worried about the effect that could have on her ability to get credit.

"I live from check to check," she said at a March 20 union demonstration in Washington opposing the budget cuts.

Capital Rally

About 150 union members attended the rally, part of a nationwide protest sponsored by the American Federation of Government Employees. Workers chanted their opposition to the sequestration and held signs saying Congress should take unpaid leave instead.

Congress passed a spending bill today that keeps the government funded through Sept. 30, while largely leaving sequestration budget cuts in place. The legislation includes a provision aimed at preventing furloughs of government meat inspectors, and also provides modest funding increases for the Defense Department and nutrition programs.

Both sides said the spending deal is unlikely to save many federal workers from being required to take unpaid days off.

Under federal law, government employees must be given 30 days' notice before they are furloughed.

The turmoil for federal workers pales against the pressures faced by employees in non-government jobs, said Tad DeHaven, a budget analyst at the Cato Institute, a Washington-based group that advocates for smaller government.

Shedding Tears

Private businesses simply fire employees outright when faced with the need to cut expenses, he said.

“It’s hard for me to shed a tear for federal employees who regardless of what you think of what they do, necessarily exist at the expense of the private sector,” DeHaven said.

The Congressional Budget Office, in a January 2012 report, said total hourly compensation for federal employees was \$52, compared with \$45 per hour for their counterparts outside government. That 16 percent gap proves there’s room to trim, DeHaven said.

Federal workers get a “bad rap,” said Carolyn Raines-Fein, a Labor Department employee in Washington.

“People don’t understand the work we do,” she said in an interview at the Washington rally a few blocks from the U.S. Capitol. “When it affects them, then they’ll understand.”

Eventually, federal employees say their pain will spread to the rest of the public, and pressure on lawmakers will grow.

Traffic Controllers

Ben Murray, an air traffic controller in Charlotte, North Carolina, said his pay will be cut about 10 percent for the remainder of the fiscal year.

While saying he’s not looking forward to taking home less pay, he’s more concerned with how it will change his workplace. Furloughs mean the average shift of 85 controllers during the day will be cut as much as 20 percent, Murray, who leads the local National Air Traffic Controllers Association union, said in an interview. Such a reduction would cut 17 positions on the shift.

Fewer controllers will mean delays for travelers flying into the Charlotte airport, Murray said. The airport had 703 departures and landings daily and served 41.2 million travelers in 2012, according to the its website.

“We can’t move as many flights as we normally would,” said Murray.

In the weeks before the March 1 deadline triggering budget cuts, federal officials issued a series of warnings about their effect, including delays at airports and border crossings and delayed training and deployment of military personnel.

Border Agents

Sequestration will also sharply cut the hours U.S. agents protecting the border. Customs and Border Protection funding may be reduced by more than \$500 million, according to a March 1 report by the White House Office of Management and Budget.

Shawn Moran, vice president of the National Border Patrol Council, representing 17,000 non-supervisory agents, said his income may fall about 40 percent as he loses overtime pay and takes unpaid leave.

“Any purchase outside of a grocery bill or my mortgage is out the window,” he said in an interview.

Randazzo, head of Local 1619 of the National Federation of Federal Employees, said he blames both sides. The inability of Congress and President Barack Obama to reach a compromise that would avoid furloughs leaves members of his union feeling under-valued, he said.

“It’s not about the money -- it’s almost like they want us to feel the pain,” Randazzo said.