

NewStatesman

The dangerous consequences of Trump's shutdown

Sophie McBain

January 16, 2019

On 12 January, the US government shutdown entered its 22nd day, making it the longest in American history. Prospects for an end to the political deadlock remained distant. President Donald Trump has refused to pass any bill to reopen the government that does not allocate \$5.7bn for a border wall (or “steel fence”) with Mexico; the Democrats have said they will not fund a project they consider profligate and immoral; nor do they want to reward Trump's political brinkmanship by ceding to his demand now.

By day 23 of the shutdown, a blizzard over Washington, DC had dropped more than ten inches of snow on the capital and thousands of federal government workers queued in the forbidding cold to collect food from five pop-up food banks established in the wake of the crisis. Around 800,000 federal government workers have missed at least one pay cheque; by 25 January many will have missed two. The average take-home pay of a federal government worker is \$500 a week, which means few have a financial buffer against a protracted pay freeze.

The 350,000 federal workers who have been furloughed, or temporarily sent home, can at least apply for unemployment benefit or seek temporary work. The remainder are working for free in order to maintain essential government services. On Twitter, federal government employees and contractors used the hashtag #ShutdownStories to share their anxieties over mounting medical bills and overdue mortgage payments, or to disclose that they were forced to call in sick because they could not afford to drive into work. A tip sheet sent to US Coast Guard employees suggested they could host garage sales, babysit, dog-walk, or work as mystery shoppers or tutors to cover their bills.

Americans who are dependent on federal aid are also increasingly vulnerable. Under historic land agreements, Native Americans receive federal government funding for many basic services, including health care, food, road maintenance and policing. Without a deal, funding for food stamps and other forms of food aid serving over 38 million low-income Americans will expire in March. Millions of Americans depend on government rent subsidies and could face eviction should the shutdown stretch beyond February.

More than a thousand government-backed contracts for low-cost housing have already expired and the department of housing and urban development has been forced to send letters to landlords asking them not to evict tenants. In March, funding for Section 8 rent vouchers, used by 2.2 million Americans, will run out.

For other Americans the impact of the shutdown is more insidious, but no less real. By 11 January the shutdown had cost the US economy \$3.6bn, according to analysis by S&P Global Ratings. The food and drugs administration has halted routine domestic food inspections, raising the risk of food poisoning outbreaks. Aviation safety inspectors have also stopped working. Even agencies that are critical to national security are operating with limited staffing and funds.

Jirs Meuris, a professor at the Wisconsin Business School who studies how financial stress harms worker performance, underlined the risk of entrusting vital national security functions, from counterterrorism to aviation safety, to unpaid federal workers. “As their financial insecurity grows, we can be sure that our own security falters along with it,” he told the *Atlantic* magazine.

As the real dangers posed by an extended government shutdown grow, Trump has continued to stoke politically manufactured national security fears. He insists a border wall is the only way to stem the flow of drugs into the US and to protect American citizens from foreign-born criminals, but the drug enforcement administration says most illegal drugs enter the US through legal ports of entry; and a study by the libertarian think tank the Cato Institute found that immigrants were less likely than native-born Americans to have criminal convictions.

Several recent surveys have found that four in ten Americans support the building of a border wall, a slight increase that suggests Trump’s fear-mongering is having some impact.

The only real obstacle to a political solution is the president’s intransigence. On 10 January he stormed out of a meeting with congressional leaders when Democrats reiterated that they would not fund his wall. As the shutdown entered its third week, Trump retreated from earlier threats to declare a national emergency in order to secure border wall funding. His administration has reportedly explored diverting disaster relief funds to the wall. Declaring a national emergency might allow Trump to save face, but it would trigger an immediate challenge from the courts.

Meanwhile, a handful of Republicans have publicly called for Trump to reopen the government without a border wall agreement. A *Washington Post/ABC News* poll found that more than half of Americans blame the president and the GOP for the shutdown.

As has become clear, Trump triggered a government shutdown without fully understanding the implications. Now its costs are becoming glaringly apparent – yet the president appears psychologically unable or unwilling to end it.