

As Shutdown rages on, GRCC families are affected

By: Gabriel Solis, Grand Rapids Community College

The government shutdown entered its fifth week on Wednesday as the debate over the Congressional spending budget rages on. Democrat and Republican lawmakers have failed to reach an agreement on the extension of government-subsidized healthcare covered under the Affordable Care Act.

As the shutdown continues, the Grand Rapids Community College community has not emerged unscathed. Almost 5,000 federal employees reside in Michigan's third Congressional district, which encompasses Grand Rapids proper as well as many of the surrounding areas. Many of these employees have had their pay affected by the lapse in funding. Even for those who do not work directly for the federal government, the impact can be severe. Millions of Americans who rely on government assistance programs have been stranded as these programs run out of funding.

Terrence Moore, Veteran School Certifying Official at GRCC's Veteran's Center, says that many of the students he works with are struggling to cope with the financial ramifications of the shutdown.

"I do have quite a few veterans who are currently experiencing a bit of hardship due to not receiving their monthly funding or their tuition not being paid as of current."

Moore is in charge of managing educational benefits for veterans attending GRCC. Many of these students are entitled to what is known as a monthly housing allowance, an amount of money allotted to them by the federal government based on their credit hours. Moore explains that this money helps veterans "to keep their bills paid and keep themselves fed" as they attend college. Due to the lack of federal funding as a result of the shutdown, many of these students did not receive October's payment, forcing them to seek emergency assistance through GRCC.

"I'm not sure exactly what to do for them past that," says Moore.

Both the Democrats and the Republicans made specific mention of support for veterans in their official 2024 party platforms.

On Oct. 23, the federal government directed states to hold SNAP (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program) benefits for residents until further notice. This will affect 1.4 million Michigan residents – about 15 percent of the population – who rely on the program for food. WOODTV reports that Exodus Place, a non-profit housing program for men experiencing homelessness in Grand Rapids, would lose \$27,000 per month without SNAP benefits. At the end of October, the Michigan Department of Health and Human Services announced that federal contingency funding would allow Michiganders to receive partial benefits beginning Nov. 8.

GRCC students and families are far from the only ones touched by the shutdown. The same program cuts affecting Michiganders are also happening nationwide. Hundreds of thousands of federal workers across the country have been furloughed as a result of congressional failure to reach an agreement. Many workers that the government deems “essential” have even been forced to work without pay in order to keep their jobs.

The stalemate in Congress is not unprecedented. While the current shutdown is now the longest in US history, the second occurred in late 2018 and early 2019, during President Trump’s first term. The government was shut down for 35 days as Congress debated over a proposed \$5.7 billion of funding towards the President’s proposed Southern border wall – a stipulation that Trump himself insisted be included in the budget.

At the time, the President commented, “I don’t call it a shutdown, I call it doing what you have to do for the benefit and safety of our country.” He also stated that he was prepared for the shutdown to last “years.” On January 25, 2019, Trump signed a spending bill that did not include the added funding for the border wall. The next month, he declared a state of national emergency over what he characterized as a crisis at the Southern border, and attempted with varying success to allocate military funding towards the wall.

This time around, the situation is in some ways reversed. Democrats in the House and Senate are refusing to pass the proposed spending bill without the extension of pandemic-era health care subsidization, which would otherwise expire by the end of the year. Their Republican colleagues argue that the health care funding should be negotiated separately. Without some form of extension of the health care funding, millions of Americans would lose their coverage.

The partisanship that defines modern politics has been particularly prevalent in light of the shutdown.

In mid-October, the Trump administration attempted to fire over 4,000 federal workers across multiple departments, including the Treasury Department and the Department of Health and Human Services. A federal judge issued a temporary order to block the move, stating that it was politically motivated and adding, “It’s a human cost that cannot be tolerated.” That order has since been extended.

As blame and political insults fly from both directions across the aisle, the front page of whitehouse.gov displays a banner reading, “Democrats Have Shut Down The Government.” Other federal websites, including usda.gov and HUD.gov, now contain pop-up boxes with partisan messaging and references to the “Radical Left.”

Public blame is much more evenly spread. A five-day Reuters/Ipsos poll published on Oct. 21 indicates that 50% of respondents blame Congressional Republicans for the funding lapse, while 47% blame Congressional Democrats.

On Friday, Nov. 7, a planned congressional vote on an updated spending bill did not materialize, leaving no end in sight for the shutdown.

Judge's Comments: "A first-rate piece that covers many aspects of how the GRCC community is affected by the shutdown. Particularly impressive is the use of data and story's balance on this highly partisan issue. Fun to see how both the Dems and GOP supported Veteran benefits in their platforms, but now their respective stances, taken for different reasons, are again denying them benefits.

Story does a fine job of showing the gap between what's been said publicly and what's reality, an extremely important aspect during this time of information distortion at top levels, yet it does not come off to a neutral observer as biased. Keep up the fine work!"