

Bracing for a possible federal shutdown

Written by By Holly J. Wagner Sun Correspondent
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A big question remained on everyone's mind this week: What happens if the federal government shuts down?

A shutdown could come as soon as Oct. 1 – the start of the federal government's 2024 fiscal year – if Congress can't come up with a short- or long-term budget. Even if that's avoided now, it could happen later in the month or year, after the Senate tinkers with the House proposal and sends it back for approval.

A shutdown now is likely to cut deeper than the last one, which started over the holidays in 2018 and dragged into the new year. That's because in the 2019 shutdown Congress had approved five of the necessary 12 spending bills before the shutdown. This time, none have been passed at press time.

How will that affect citizens? Fortunately, some services are funded outside of the budget bills that go before Congress annually, so those services will not be affected.

"Postal Service operations will not be interrupted in the event of a government shutdown, and all post offices will remain open for business as usual," United State Postal Service spokeswoman

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Sherry Patterson said. “Because we are an independent entity that is generally funded through the sale of our products and services, and not by tax dollars, our services will not be impacted by a government shutdown.”

Although people on public assistance or Social Security should receive their benefits on time because those have ongoing funding, reaching customer service if there’s a problem could be a challenge.

Like Social Security, Medicare benefits will remain available, but both agencies may stop benefit verification and card issuance during a shutdown.

Health care services for veterans and Native Americans would continue.

“In case there is government shutdown, there will be no impact on veterans’ health care,”

Veterans Affairs spokesperson Paula Aragon said.

Checks will go out, the clinic in Gallup will remain open and burials will continue at VA cemeteries.

“We will continue to provide benefits including housing, compensation, pensions [and] education. The only caveat is that VA will not be able to conduct veterans outreach,” Aragon explained. Veteran outreach includes things like career counseling and transition services.

Federal courts would remain open for at least two weeks, but after that the future is uncertain, Mitch Elfers, Clerk of the U.S. District Court, District of New Mexico, said.

“While all Federal Judicial agencies [U.S. District Court, U.S. Bankruptcy Court, U.S. Probation

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& Pretrial Services, and the Office of the Federal Public Defender] will be impacted by a full or partial government shutdown, the Judiciary has funding that will allow it to continue operations for at least one pay period during a lapse in funding,” he said. “Contingency plans are being made to address a government shutdown that extends beyond the two weeks of Judiciary funding...the court will enter an administrative order [and will share] that plan as early as possible.”

The U.S. Department of Agriculture did not respond to an inquiry by press time, but according to the nonprofit Committee for a Responsible Federal Budget, the Supplementary Nutritional Assistance Program is mandatory, but the ability to send out benefits could be affected by a shutdown.

During the last shutdown the USDA paid February SNAP benefits early Jan. 20, just before the 30-day window ended, but it would have been unable to pay March benefits if the shutdown had dragged on. In addition, stores are not able to renew their Electronic Benefit Transfer card licenses during a shutdown, so those whose licenses expire would not be able to accept SNAP benefits until after a shutdown.

A spokesman for the U.S Department of Interior said Sept. 25, “We have nothing to share today.”

Some federal employees may be furloughed while their offices close or scale back to skeleton crews, while other offices will stay open but the workers required to show up may not receive their wages until after a shutdown ends. The 2019 shutdown lasted 35 days.

Data on how much the 2019 shutdown impacted the McKinley County economy was not immediately available.

Nationally, the travel sector could lose \$140 million daily in a shutdown, according to the U.S. Travel Industry Association. That means a shutdown could make a dent in tourism in New Mexico, home to 18 National Parks and monuments. Some parks could be shuttered, and many other sites could lose basic maintenance like trash collection until a shutdown ends.

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The National Parks Service did not respond to inquiries by press time. In 2013 more than 400 parks were closed. In 2019 many parks remained open but did not have services. Closures cost not only the parks but discourage tourism in the areas around them until they reopen.

A trip to Gallup's airport probably won't be much affected, but it could be a different story landing in Phoenix or at other airports, as Transportation Security Administration and air traffic control employees may be affected. In the 2019 shutdown, they had to work without pay.

No matter how long it lasts, one group won't be affected: Congress. U.S. legislators will still get their paychecks during a shutdown.

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