

Government Shutdown Affecting People with Disabilities

January 23, 2019



“I have more questions than answers at this point. Why is this shutdown still going on? Why are we the ones who suffer when we were just doing our jobs? When will I be able to go back to work?”

Those were the feelings expressed by Joseph, a mailroom employee at the Environmental Protection Agency, who has been unable to attend work due to the government shutdown. As the government shutdown approaches its fourth consecutive week, many employees working within the federal government share Joseph’s sentiments and worry that there is no end in sight.

While the plight of federal employees during this shutdown has been well-documented by politicians and the media, few have addressed its impact on those working for federal contracts, including individuals like Joseph employed through the AbilityOne Program.

The AbilityOne Program provides employment for approximately 45,000 people who are blind or have significant disabilities and is the largest source of employment for individuals with disabilities in the country. Employees within the AbilityOne Program serve the federal government in a variety of ways; they operate mailrooms and provide logistics support or administrative services at a multitude of government agencies.

The unemployment rate for people with disabilities is more than twice that of those with no disability, a figure which does not include those who are not considered in the labor force because they’ve stopped looking for employment. The AbilityOne Program offers people with disabilities a fulfilling career and contributes to their independence and self-sufficiency.

It is because of our employees with disabilities that I am most concerned during this partial government shutdown. As the CEO of ServiceSource, a non-profit resource provider for individuals with disabilities based in Northern Virginia, I believe it is our duty as a citizenry to work together to create communities where everyone can thrive. The hard working, dedicated people with disabilities serving the federal government should not be lost in this shuffle.

Joseph says that he loves coming to work each day—and earning a paycheck. He enjoys being part of a team and working hard to make sure all the mail gets where it needs to go. He enjoys staying busy at work and finds that, on some days, he has so much to do that he finds himself asking, “Where has the time gone?”

Jelen, one of Joseph’s co-workers, also enjoys his job in the mailroom. The shutdown has made Jelen feel “sad and frustrated.” He found it “upsetting” that a political stalemate has kept him from being able to return to the job that he loves. Not only does he miss the job itself but also

Government Shutdown Affecting People with Disabilities January 23, 2019

his teammates; Jelen said that he has met many of his friends through AbilityOne, and he wishes that he could see them again at work.

Ki, Jelen's mother, said that the shutdown has had a personal and professional impact on her son. She said that he derives a "sense of pride in being able to work since it has been such a long road [to find employment]." Jelen was unemployed for almost two years before finding his current position. Due to his disability, Jelen benefits from having consistency and routine, which his job provides. After Jelen was hired through the AbilityOne Program, Ki says that he leaves the house with "a smile on his face every day."

However, the government shutdown has introduced a great degree of uncertainty and unpredictability for Jelen and his family. Jelen cares deeply about his job and has become anxious about his future; the family now has daily conversations with him about his employment situation to remind him that he did nothing wrong.

ServiceSource manages the AbilityOne contract at the Environmental Protection Agency that employs both Joseph and Jelen. ServiceSource also manages AbilityOne contracts with the Department of Commerce, Department of Agriculture and National Archives which are currently closed. Within ServiceSource alone, more than 90 employees are sitting at home instead of supporting the mission of their respective agencies.

Unlike workers employed directly by the federal government, employees working for federal contractors did not receive any backpay during past government shutdowns. Senator Warner (D-Va) and Senator Kaine (D-Va) are working on [legislation](#) to provide backpay to federal contractors.

Politicians from both parties should remember that this discussion is about more than just border walls; it is about people. The President and Congress have a responsibility to the employees – like Joseph and Jelen – who work hard every day to keep the ship of state moving smoothly. Politicians have a choice to make: will they forgo the wellbeing of thousands of federal workers and federal contractors or will they put the interests of the country and our federal workforce before partisan politics? We encourage elected leaders to take advice from Joseph, that "nothing is more important than teamwork," and end this shutdown!

Janet Samuelson serves as the Chief Executive Officer and President of ServiceSource, a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization with a mission to facilitate services and partnerships to support people with disabilities, their families, their caregivers and community members in order to build more inclusive communities.