

Focus Group Results for 2018-2019 Federal Government Shutdown

Katharine French-Fuller, Ph.D., Research Extension Director

Center for Community Engaged Learning
Research Extension
2955 Harrison Blvd
Ogden, UT 84403
801-626-7879
ccelcre@weber.edu

Contents

Acknowledgements 2

Introduction 3

The Experience of the 2018-2019 Shutdown 3

Short- and Medium-Term Effect of the Shutdown 6

Ideas for Mobilizing during the Next Shutdown 6

Conclusion 8

Acknowledgements

The mission of the CCEL Research Extension (RE) is to meet the research and data needs of the greater Northern Utah community. This report would not have been possible without the support of the Kimberly Love, Program Coordinator in the Center for Continuing Education, and Guy Letendre, Economic Development Director in University Advancement. We appreciate their contributions in time and project direction. In addition, we thank focus group participants for lending their voice and time for this critical project. Dr. French-Fuller conducted the focus groups and authored this report. Taylor Calabrese and Raquel Lemos provided data analysis and focus group support.

Preferred Citation

French-Fuller, Katharine. (2020). *Focus Group Results for 2018-2019 Federal Government Shutdown*. Weber State University: Center for Community Engaged Learning.

Introduction

In the winter and spring of 2019, Weber State University's Center for Community Engaged Learning–Research Extension (CELE-RE) assessed the impact of the federal government shutdown by conducting a survey of federal employees, nonprofits, and businesses in Northern Utah, especially the Ogden area. The survey revealed some interesting data points: about one third of respondents had missed a mortgage or rent payment, 72% had poor mental health during the shutdown, and 30% had gone to a food pantry or received some sort of food assistance. While illuminating, the survey also raised several questions: how could the community better prepare next time to help those affected? Did those with bad anxiety and stress seek help for their mental health, and if not, why not? What were additional short- and medium-term impacts of the shutdown? Is there anything else we didn't understand about how the shutdown affected workers and nonprofits?

Therefore, the CELE-RE conducted a round of focus groups with furloughed and nonprofit workers to follow-up on the survey results of spring 2019. We spoke with nine federal and nonprofit workers over three focus groups in September 2019. Those who participated responded to the RE's original survey and said they would be willing contribute feedback in focus groups. The workers spoke most frequently and with most intensity about how the shutdown worsened their mental health, deteriorated morale in the workplace, and affected their families' finances. They also mentioned the need for resources and services to be more available and provided sooner, their feelings associated with being used as political pawns, difficulties they had with planning during the shutdown, and what the community could do differently during the next shutdown. The following report is divided into three parts: The Experience of the 2018-2019 Shutdown, Short- and Medium-Term Effects of the Shutdown, and Ideas for Mobilizing during the Next Shutdown.

The Experience of the 2018-2019 Shutdown

- 1) *Mental Health* – Both survey and focus group participants described how difficult the shutdown was for their mental health. One employee who had to work without pay noted the shutdown affected “me not [in] the ways I thought it would...” and that “by the end of the shutdown I was crying all the time” at work. They found disparaging comments by politicians or those posting comments on the internet to be particularly distressing and spoke at length about the negative ramifications of these comments. It made them feel undervalued, expendable, and like pawns. Financial worries contributed to a great deal of workers' stress and anxiety. In part, this was due to the unknown timeframe of the shutdown, and they were unsure about how to plan for financial insecurity as they had “no information” upon which to base decisions because they “didn't know when it was going to end.” Some noted they were lucky enough to have family members help them pay for groceries, gas, or even mortgage payments, but that other workers struggled to pay bills or make arrangements with daycares whom they were unable to pay. Workers worried about these colleagues without sufficient support networks whom they believed to be more severely impacted by the shutdown (single parents, for instance). Some furloughed workers felt helpless to assist those working without pay and wished they could do more, like pick up food from the food pantry. While someone who worked without pay noted, “I know I became resentful, not of the individuals being home, but of the circumstance they got to be home. Because they could apply for unemployment. They

could apply for assistance where those of us sitting there working couldn't." In addition, workers said they were required to report back within four hours of the shutdown ending. This timeline caused stress and anxiety as they were attuned constantly to news developments knowing that any day they would have to be back to work within a few hours. Workers also stressed about the backlog of work that was piling up and worried about how missing deadlines and other commitments would affect their business relationships. Thus, while financial stress played a big part in those suffering from poor mental health, these other confounding issues also contributed to stress during the shutdown.

Some workers expressed skepticism that therapists or other mental health professionals could have helped them during the shutdown: "It wouldn't [have] helped...it would not have helped to seek a mental health professional's help 'cause the only thing that would help me is knowing when I was going back to work." They weren't sure what skill or stress management techniques could help them if the ultimate stressor were still present. However, they did acknowledge how commiserating with colleagues in online forums during the shutdown and participating in the focus group was "cathartic."

- 2) *Pawns and Poor Morale* – Workers view events like the furlough and the negative rhetoric about federal agencies and workers as harmful to morale in their workplaces. As one employee who worked without pay noted,

So like the first week or two, it was more fun and games at work. It was like everybody kept expecting it to end...and after about the second week, things just really started to shift, and people were now worrying...going into the second month so that we were so behind on things as well. Watching some of the other women, especially in my unit, and I say the women especially because there's [sic] some single moms, and they still had to pay daycare...by the third and fourth week...everyone pretty much lost it.

All workers were angry to have experienced mental and financial fallout when "there was no real reason for [the shutdown]" and "no justification for it." They were strongly resentful for being used, in their view, as political pawns. This made them feel like they lacked control over their own lives: "we're just a pawn in their little temper tantrums," said one employee. Compounding their frustrations, they found it demoralizing when they heard politicians or members of the public denigrate them and their work. They argued that the long-term government shutdown equated to the government breaking a social contract between "our political system and the citizens of this country and the federal workforce."

The ramifications continue, with workers describing how morale remained low six months after the shutdown because they were still behind on work and worried about more government shutdowns. More than that, workers worry about the future of federal service and that talented young people are not interested in working for the government because of negative attitudes toward the government and the increasing instability of government work. They asserted this is in part because many Americans do not appreciate the work of the government. After all, so much of their work is invisible:

“They don’t see the benefit of the government. Like having clean water...” Several workers said that they were considering leaving federal service, and one person said that they definitely were because of the low morale and threat of ongoing shutdowns. A career federal worker asked, “Where are the bail points? ...for me, that started coming in around week four.” In other words, they were considering at what point to make plans to switch jobs. Thus, some workers focused on the broader systemic problems in addition to their own personal fallout from the shutdown.

- 3) *Planning and Financial Worries* – Workers found it extremely difficult to figure out how to make financial decisions without knowing how long the shutdown would last: when should they apply for unemployment? Apply to skip a payment? Dip into savings? Ask family for help? Go to the food pantry? As one worker noted, “You can’t stretch your money for an infinite amount of time” and, while they didn’t want to take resources from others, they also found it difficult to figure out what the best financial decision would be without knowing how long the shutdown would last. Many low-level GS employees were living paycheck to paycheck and, if they had to work without pay, found it a struggle to pay for food, gas, and childcare—let alone rent, mortgage, or car payments. Those working without pay could apply for programs such as free school lunch or SNAP, but there is always a lag time in becoming eligible for those services as applicants need to prove a lack of income.
- 4) *Professional Reputation* – The workers we spoke with expressed much pride in the work that they do and in being part of federal service. For some, their work is “your identity – it is a big part of [y]our identity.” Therefore they resented being forcibly furloughed as they are “really committed to [their] work and...pretty driven.” They were worried not only about the backlog of work that piled up during the shutdown but how it was hurting professional relationships and how missing their professional obligations made them seem unreliable. As one IT worker said, “It just destroyed a lot of cohesion between us, especially [with] the contractors.” The furlough forced them to be unproductive workers incapable of protecting their professional reputations. One worker expressed it this way: “You don’t feel like you’re being productive. And you get that kind of guilt that—or an anger that you’re not allowed to work and everything...and some of us take our jobs seriously. Like we’re civil employees, we’re working for the government and, ya [sic] know, it’s a service.” As focus group participants emphasized, the furlough made them feel a lack of control over their professional lives and was a significant source of stress.
- 5) *Caring Community* – While workers expressed dismay at the negative comments leveled at them online and by national politicians, they felt like their local community had been very supportive: “The community was fantastic,” noted one focus group participant. They appreciated businesses that offered free coffee or haircuts and felt more likely to support them in the future. They mentioned how some banks and credit unions, specifically America First, helped work with them on deferred loan-payment programs.
- 6) *Workers’ Unions* – The unions representing government workers sent out emails with legislative updates and organized a local rally. However, based on the information this research project gathered, they did not assist in helping struggling workers with food, gas, childcare payments, or other necessities. Local nonprofits found it almost impossible to get in touch with local union leaders so they could figure out how to best

help: “The union, at that point, wasn’t answering anybody back about anything...they didn’t have a good backbone for responding...to kind of mobilize.”

Short- and Medium-Term Effect of the Shutdown

- 1) *Mental Health* – The mental health of workers was still affected six months after the shutdown ended. Even those who adequately weathered the shutdown expressed anxiety over another possible shutdown in fall 2019. Workers were worried because they did not believe they could survive another shutdown financially. It could push them out of federal service permanently: “I can’t worry about where my food’s gonna come from or how I’m gonna pay my mortgage.” Others commented that the instability produced by the constant cycle of shutdown threats produced too much stress and anxiety. In addition, morale in many departments continued to be low, which also seemed to affect workplace satisfaction and overall wellbeing. One worker was on FMLA and had no plans to return to their job while another had increased their anxiety medication. Many participants still needed to process their experience. They expressed that just participating in the focus groups seven months after the shutdown as having a therapeutic effect, allowing them to think through planning, and was “cathartic.”
- 2) *Morale, Professional Reputation, and Federal Service* – Morale in some departments was still low six months after the shutdown because of the disparaging comments made by politicians and the public at large. Workers still felt deeply underappreciated and misunderstood. They expressed an ongoing concern that the threat of intermittent, long-term shutdowns was one of many factors contributing to severe recruitment and retention problem in federal agencies. One worker noted there was no one in their 20s at the agency and very few people in their 30s. The shutdown prompted even those with 20 or 30 years of federal service to consider switching careers. Some workers said they were still behind on work and discussed the issue of a damaged professional reputation as an ongoing problem.

Ideas for Mobilizing during the Next Shutdown

- 1) *Backbone Organization* - Government and nonprofit workers noted that it would be helpful to have a local nonprofit agency that serves as a backbone organization to coordinate efforts during the next long term shutdown. They suggested the United Way of Northern Utah might be able to fill that role. A backbone agency could collect donations for childcare payments, gas cards, food, and rent/mortgage payments. They could coordinate with the Chamber of Commerce to publicize local businesses that offer free services (from coffee to a visit to the trampoline park). It could also promote the availability of resources and services to those in need and coordinate informal get-togethers (like meals) and resource nights. In conjunction with partnering nonprofits, the agency could plan ahead of time how to mobilize after one week, two weeks, or one month of a shutdown.

- 2) *Access to Services and Resources* - Government workers said it was difficult for those working without pay to visit services (like the food pantry) as they tend to operate during business hours. They suggested it would be helpful for food pantries to institute a process where designated friends, family, or furloughed workers could pick up food for those working without pay. Two nonprofits who operate food pantries in the Ogden area noted they together served 536 more families, an increase of roughly 30%. These data suggest a strong need for assistance, considering that many working without pay were not able to access those food pantries.
- 3) *Childcare* - Government workers noted how hard it was for some colleagues with children to continue paying for childcare during the shutdown. Those furloughed couldn't give up a spot at the childcare by withdrawing their child, and those working without pay had to send their children but had no way of paying (primarily single parents). They suggested that the designated backbone organization collect donations for childcare and distribute these funds to those in need.
- 4) *Events/Meals* - Government workers stated they found participating in the focus groups to be therapeutic. They said that during the shutdown social media groups also provided outlets to vent and to help each other. They expressed a desire for a potential backbone agency to organize events such as dinners that would serve two purposes: 1) give furloughed workers the ability to get together for a sense of community, commiserate, and share what they knew of resources and services; 2) serve as a resource fair where local food pantries, mental healthcare providers, banks, credit unions, etc. could be present to make workers aware of what resources and services are available to them.
- 5) *Communication Strategy* - Both nonprofit and government workers discussed the best way to reach furloughed workers during the next shutdown. They both mentioned social media, local television news, the local newspaper (the *Standard-Examiner*), word of mouth, and online social media support groups as being effective last time. Those efforts should therefore be intensified, expanded, and coordinated during the next government shutdown (e.g., host a dinner and resource fair early on in the shutdown to help spread word about resources and maintain a sense of community). While the local unions did not share information regarding local resources during this past shutdown, focus group participants speculated that perhaps next time unions could text members. Participants also wondered if an old fashioned telephone tree would be a good way to get the word out about resources to both those working without pay and those furloughed. If the timing was right, Ogden City could even publish information on the monthly newsletter that accompanies residents' water bills. Getting information out and bring resources online quickly could help alleviate anxiety and stress produced by the uncertainty of the unknown shutdown period.
- 6) *Local Business Support* - Government workers were grateful to all businesses who reached out to government employees. They particularly noted how businesses on Ogden's 25th Street, located near one federal building, offered free coffee and meals. However, most workers are located on Ogden's 12th Street, where there were no or few businesses offering supports to workers. They suggested that participation from those businesses would be appreciated next time.

- 7) *Mental Health* - The stress and anxiety levels of most workers were very high during the shutdown and continued to be so in September 2019 when we conducted the focus groups. Both groups of workers suggested that more information and access should be made available to those seeking mental health care next time. A potential backbone agency could coordinate with local mental healthcare providers like McKay Dee Hospital, Ogden Regional Medical Center, Midtown Clinic, Family Counseling Service, Weber Human Services, or Aloha Behavioral Consultants to make sure workers are aware of *available* low to no cost mental healthcare.
- 8) *Planning* - Government workers found it very difficult to plan (especially with financial decisions) as they did not know how long the shutdown would last, and they were still puzzling at the time of focus groups about how to make the best decisions for their financial and mental health. As one worker said, “How do you make decisions without information?” They suggested a financial decision tree or the availability of financial advisors during the next shutdown would alleviate some of that stress.

Similarly, nonprofits struggled to know when they should bring services online: “Well, and it’s almost a catch-22, I’d say, ‘cause if it is a, like, a couple of days or a week, you don’t need all the resources” but if “it’s gonna be shut down for six weeks, like, people know how to mobilize, right?” It is challenging to fundraise when the shutdown is not currently happening (donations for gas cards or a childcare fund) as there is no urgency, and other community issues are more pressing. Even getting a potential backbone organization to make plans, determine processes, and set aside funds for a potential future shutdown in an unknown amount of time in the future could be challenging. However, a clear communication and mobilization plan is essential for whenever the next shutdown occurs. This would include coordinating with the Chamber of Commerce and local businesses, coordinating with nonprofits who could distribute food and gas cards, establishing processes for distributing childcare or rent payments, organizing resource nights, establishing a communications strategy, and more.

Conclusion

The financial, mental-health, and workplace-related effects of the 2018-2019 federal government shutdown did not end with the shutdown. The likelihood of another long-term shutdown in the near to medium future is probable, yet organizing a prepared response seems complicated considering the urgency of the shutdown is over, and there are other pressing, local issues. However, a coordinated response to a government shutdown that could reach workers in need who require food, gas, childcare, mental healthcare, and other assistance would alleviate some of the negative impacts of the next potential shutdown on government workers in particular and the community as a whole.