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HOT CENTERPIECE

Community's federal workers feeling pinched by shutdown

By ONOFRIO CASTIGLIA The Winchester Star
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The Rev. Matt Rhodes of Christ Church in Millwood stands in the Christ Church Cares Food Pantry on Tuesday. The pantry is open for federal workers hurt by the government shutdown.

Onofrio Castiglia/The Winchest

WINCHESTER — One federal employee who lives in the Northern Shenandoah Valley donated food and money to her church just before Christmas to help those in need. On Tuesday, the 25th day of the partial federal government shutdown, she said she will need to go to that same church to

get food for herself.

"I'm going to have to go to that same food pantry," said the woman, who asked not to be identified. As a result of the shutdown, she has missed one paycheck and doesn't expect to receive one for the current pay period. She said she's not sure she will be able to negotiate missed rent payments with her landlord. And the bills are starting to pile up. "It's very stressful."

The shutdown, fueled by a political standoff over \$5.7 billion in federal funds to build a wall on the U.S.-Mexico border, is the longest in American history. About 800,000 federal government workers are affected, though many of them still have to report to work without pay.

The federal worker interviewed by The Star must report to her job in the Washington, D.C., area, even though she's not getting paid.

"It's \$25 a day in gas," she said during a phone interview on the commute home. Her E-Z Pass ran out of money, and a toll booth worker had to wait while she scrounged up \$7.50 in cash.

"God," she said with a heavy sigh as she managed to pay the toll. "I just... I just don't know."

The woman said she has been checking with local charities and churches to see where she might find help paying some of her bills. Federal government employees are talking to each other at work about where they can find help.

"I voted for President Trump... but I'm getting upset here," she said. "It's not right to do this to people."

Elise Stine-Dolinar, marketing director for the United Way of Northern Shenandoah Valley, said on Tuesday that six federal workers have come to the nonprofit agency for help since the shutdown began. All are first-time clients.

"They're coming to us for the full spectrum of need," she said. Housing, food, transportation and childcare are the main things they need help with. "More people than we realize are living paycheck-to-paycheck in our community."

Through the Valley Assistance Network, a United Way program, some area residents have donated gas cards to federal employees who still have to commute to work even though they aren't collecting a paycheck.

Jennifer Hall, director of community engagement for the United Way, said she has been directing federal employees to the Federal Employee Education and Assistance Fund, the only nonprofit organization dedicated to providing emergency financial assistance to civilian federal public servants.

She's also sending them to the Congregational Community Action Project (CCAP), a local nonprofit group at 112 S. Kent St. that offers food and other assistance, as well as to some churches.

The federal worker interviewed by The Star said she'd been to several churches seeking help but was told that January's funds are depleted. On Monday, she went to CCAP but it was closed because of the snow.

"It needs to end," she said of the shutdown. "But I don't think it's going to."

Area food banks say they are stocking up to help federal workers affected by the shutdown, in addition to people who rely on federal food assistance programs.

"There are a lot of people on SNAP and WIC," the Rev. Matt Rhodes of Christ Church in Millwood said, referring to the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program and the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children, respectively.

Those federal programs are funded through January, and the USDA has said individual states can apply for February funding. Rhodes said the Christ Church Cares Food Pantry is open to federal employees in the Boyce, Millwood and White Post areas of Clarke County who visit between Monday and Thursday from 9 a.m. to 2 p.m. "I'm hoping people out there that are struggling will take advantage of it."

Christ Church's pantry is partly stocked by the Blue Ridge Area Food Bank, which helps supply many of the area's food banks. Michael McKee, CEO of the Blue Ridge Area Food Bank, said earlier this month that if funding for the federal food assistance programs lapse, area food banks won't be able to feed the thousands of people in the region who rely on them.

As of Tuesday, several area businesses were offering discounts and freebies to federal employees.

Andy Gyurisin, creative manager for The Alamo Drafthouse Cinema in Kernstown, said the theater is offering one free movie ticket per day to federal employees who have ID.

"We know there's a lot of people here who make the commute," he said of federal workers.

Schenck Foods Co. on Valley Avenue in Winchester was offering milk, eggs and toilet tissue to federal workers with a purchase, while admission to the Shenandoah Valley Discovery Museum on Cork Street in Winchester was 50 percent off for federal workers and their families.

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Local federal government worker who must report to work during the partial federal government shutdown but isn't getting paid

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