

# Amid shutdown, Austin-based federal workers struggle

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Maria Recio American-Statesman correspondent | Austin American-Statesman

Julia Miller, a longtime IRS employee in Austin, was so concerned about the partial federal shutdown that began just before the holidays that she canceled Christmas.

"I returned all the gifts that I had purchased," said Miller who lives in Kyle. "It's all been painful. Depressing. Demoralizing."

IRS Austin-based customer service representative Cathy Welsh was forced to tap the college savings fund she was keeping for her son.

"I have had to cash in my 529 account in order to pay my student loan and put some gas in my car and hopefully have enough left to buy a little food," she said.

And Jamal Ashad, a Transportation Security Administration screener at Austin-Bergstrom International Airport, was facing eviction this week and, along with his wife, had to move in with his parents after the management company at his apartment rejected the government-provided letter asking for leniency for affected workers.

Texas, with 35,694 federal employees working in agencies without funding, is behind only the Washington, D.C., area and California in the number of workers affected by the partial shutdown. Nine Cabinet

agencies, including the Treasury Department, which includes the IRS, Homeland Security Department, Department of Agriculture, which administers food stamps, Interior Department and smaller agencies like NASA are operating without funding, with many workers at those agencies furloughed. Essential personnel, such as air traffic controllers and border agents, however, are required to work without pay.

The LBJ Presidential Library in Austin, funded through the National Archives and Records Administration, also is closed.

Friday is the first payday that federal workers face without a paycheck.

There are almost 9,000 Treasury Department employees in Texas, most of them in Austin, as well as 5,700 Homeland Security Department workers in the state, according to *Governing* magazine.

President Donald Trump is visiting Texas on Thursday as part of his campaign to secure funding for a wall along portions of the U.S.-Mexico border, his condition for reopening the government. Democrats remain firmly opposed to money for a wall.

"Public servants and those they serve should not be treated as bargaining chips," said U.S. Rep. Lloyd Doggett, D-Austin. "We certainly aren't made safer by denying paychecks to air traffic controllers and TSA officers at our airports, nor is the public well-served when IRS employees are kept from their vital work."

Miller, a tax-examining technician who has worked at the IRS for 28½ years and lives in Kyle, has applied for unemployment insurance. On the way to the unemployment office to verify her employment, she noticed a food bank and thought about checking out what she needed to do to

shop there. "I'm basically going through the pantry," she said.

As for the fight over the border wall, Miller said, "I don't understand why they're using that as a reason to keep me from working. It's totally unrelated."

Eddie Walker, president of a local National Treasury Employees Union chapter in Austin, said, "We don't feel we should be the ones in the middle of this." Since before the shutdown began, he said, "the anxiety levels were way up."

"We're expecting the next check, and we're not going to get that," said Walker, a tax examiner. And he wants to be sure that the public understands there are hardships: "People live paycheck to paycheck. The employees I represent are not rich."

Cheryl Eliano, national vice president of the American Federation of Government Employees, is based in Killeen and represents federal workers in 10 states, including TSA employees. "People are not going to be able to pay mortgages, car notes and other bills like utilities," she said. "They're very concerned. They're frustrated. We're being held hostage."

Henry Nnorom, Austin local president of the American Federation of Government Employees, said: "A lot of my members are single mothers. They can't pay the bills. People are afraid." Austin, he said, has a high cost of living while the TSA employees are among the lower-paid federal workers.

Air traffic controller Mark Fellner, who works at the Austin airport tower, is a union representative for the National Air Traffic Controllers

Association. "I'd say there's tension, anxiety about how to feed their families," he said of the about 40 Austin-based controllers. There are also concerns about safety, he said, because of the fewer workers available to do repairs and work on systems as well as reduced training.

"The longer this goes on, the more apt controllers are to retire early and/or quit," Fellner said. "This will shorten our staffing even more."

IRS employee Sonia Scott of Austin, who has worked for the federal government her entire career said: "I shouldn't have to face the uncertainty of not knowing when I will return to work. Throughout the years, we have been threatened with shutdowns, and it has made me question whether it is worth it to stay employed within the federal government."

