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Photo by: John Henry

Fred Pickett, a federal contractor, from Fairfax County, worries about when he will get his next paych

Federal contractors with disabilities grapple with financial uncertainty during shutdown



Nonprofit service groups estimate more than 2,000 federal contractors with disabilities have been temporarily forced out of work.

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Published: 12:12 AM EST January 23, 2019
Updated: 6:00 PM EST January 23, 2019

WASHINGTON, D.C., USA — As the partial government shutdown enters another month, furloughed workers and contractors with disabilities continue to grapple with financial uncertainty.

Fairfax County resident Fred Pickett has worked in Environmental Protection Agency mail rooms for the last 27 years.

"I like my supervisors," he said. "I like my coworkers and I like my customers."

However, Pickett, who also has a developmental disability, has been temporarily forced out of work due to the government shutdown.

"I'm angry that they [political leaders] can't get this thing settled," Pickett said.

Pickett has had to endure a number of unwelcome changes. On top of not receiving paychecks, his morning routine, where he wakes up, grabs lunch from the fridge and walks to the bus, has been on hold for weeks.

Now, all he wants is for things to go back to normal. "Unless they settle this soon, I could be in a hardship," Pickett said.

Unfortunately for Pickett, he may not even receive back pay once the shutdown is over because he is a government contractor.

Non-profit organizations like SourceAmerica and Service Source help find employment for people with disabilities. Sometimes those jobs are contracted positions provided through the federal AbilityOne program.

Ellis Rosenberg, senior vice president of growth at SourceAmerica, said there are more than 2,000 federal contractors with disabilities who are dealing with same problem as Pickett. He said those workers deserve better.

"When the shutdown eventually ends what we want is for these people who have been working and providing for their families to be able to earn back pay," Rosenberg said.

D.C. Delegate and Congresswoman Eleanor Holmes Norton has introduced a bill that would provide federal contractors with back pay after the shutdown is over.

But, Rosenberg added federal contractors with disabilities still do not have as many options available to them for relief, during a shutdown, as their coworkers.

For example, Rosenberg said finding new employment is not always a guarantee for a person with disability.

"Often, it's difficult for them to get that first job," he said. "It's not like there's a supply of jobs that are available for them."

Ken Crum, senior vice president and regional executive director for Virginia programs at Service Source, said he is concerned about what could happen to workers like Pickett when they lose their routines.

"The routine that he gets from going to work and the purpose and meaning that comes with that, that fulfillment in his life, it's so important," Crum said.

Crum said 79 employees at Service Source have been impacted by the shutdown. He described the entire situation as frustrating.

"These are jobs that are important to them, just as our jobs are important to us," Crum said.