

The Virgin Islands Consortium

EPA, Education Department, and U.S. Courts Among Agencies Hit as Layoffs Begin in Prolonged Federal Shutdown

The Trump administration confirmed mass layoffs of federal workers amid a funding stalemate now in its tenth day. Agencies from the EPA to DOE are downsizing under OMB orders, as courts warn of pending disruptions and unions file legal challenges.

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On the tenth day of the partial federal government shutdown, the Trump administration confirmed the initiation of mass layoffs for thousands of federal workers, escalating the fiscal standoff between congressional Republicans and Democrats.

Office of Management and Budget Director Russ Vought announced Friday that reductions in force (RIFs) had begun, targeting positions deemed non-essential during the funding lapse that started October 1, 2025. The move follows weeks of warnings from White House officials, including a September memo directing agencies to prepare layoff plans beyond standard furloughs. With Congress unable to pass appropriations bills for fiscal year 2026, approximately 750,000 workers had already been furloughed, but the permanent job cuts mark a departure from previous shutdowns, where employees were typically reinstated with back pay once funding resumed.

The layoffs primarily affect the executive branch, where most civilian federal employees are housed, though ripple effects extend to support roles in other branches. The U.S. Patent and Trademark Office (USPTO), under the Department of Commerce, issued notices Wednesday to staff in its Rocky Mountain Regional Outreach Office in Denver, affecting dozens of positions focused on patent processing and public engagement. Similarly, the General Services Administration (GSA) has furloughed workers in its Federal Acquisition Service and Public Buildings Service, with some laid-off employees instructed to continue duties without pay, according to internal memos. The Department of Education and environmental agencies within the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) face significant RIFs, as these were flagged in OMB guidance for misalignment with administration priorities on spending reductions.

In the judicial branch, impacts remain limited but notable, with the Administrative Office of the United States Courts reporting sufficient reserves to maintain paid operations through October 17. However, non-essential administrative staff—such as those handling records and IT support—have been furloughed, potentially delaying non-urgent case processing. The legislative branch, funded separately through its own appropriations, has furloughed about 20% of Capitol Hill staff, including aides in congressional offices and the Library of Congress, though no widespread layoffs have been reported. Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell stated during a floor speech that legislative operations would prioritize essential functions like oversight hearings, but "temporary separations" could evolve into permanent cuts if the impasse persists.

White House Press Secretary Karoline Leavitt addressed the human toll in a briefing, noting, "Millions of American federal workers are under enormous financial stress as a result, wondering how they will pay their bills and take care of their families." The administration attributes the shutdown to Democratic resistance on spending cuts and healthcare subsidies, while Democrats, led by House Minority Leader Hakeem Jeffries, counter that the layoffs are a premeditated effort to shrink government regardless of funding status.

Labor unions, including the American Federation of Government Employees, filed a federal lawsuit last week to halt the RIFs, arguing they violate laws prohibiting non-essential activities during lapses and carry criminal penalties for implementation.

Economic analysts project the layoffs could cost the U.S. economy up to \$1.5 billion weekly in lost productivity, with hotspots like the Washington, D.C., area—home to over 300,000 federal jobs—feeling acute strain. Restaurants and retailers near federal facilities have rolled out discounts for affected workers, while food banks report a 25% uptick in demand from civil servants. Active-duty military personnel, exempt from furloughs, face delayed paychecks starting this week, adding pressure on families. Sen.

Tim Kaine (D-Va.), representing a district with nearly 5,000 federal employees, warned that mid-October pay cycles would withhold portions of salaries, potentially pushing more into financial distress.

OMB Director Vought's directive ties the cuts to broader efficiency goals outlined in Project 2025, a conservative policy blueprint advocating workforce reductions. Legal challenges and bipartisan calls for back pay—mandated by a 2019 law—complicate the landscape, but administration officials maintain the actions are within executive authority. Official guidance from the Office of Personnel Management urges furloughed workers to monitor agency portals for RIF updates, as the crisis tests the resilience of federal institutions and their employees.