

1. Q: What is a furlough and how does it relate to the shutdown?

A: A shutdown furlough or emergency furlough occurs when Congress has not approved funding (appropriations) for the Federal government. The Federal government is currently not allowed to spend money after midnight Friday, December 21, 2018. If funding is not approved for after December 21st, shutdown procedures will start.

2. Q: How will I know that we are shutdown?

A: News outlets are following the Federal government funding status, so you can find the latest information through those sources. The Friday and weekend news will likely include what steps Congress and the President are taking to return the Federal government to being funded. The USDA OpsCenter will remain operational and the website address is <http://www.dm.usda.gov/beprepared/>. This site is updated daily at midnight. In addition, USDA has an Employee Information Line (1-800-932-1902) at which employees may obtain updated information about any shutdown and subsequent termination of shutdown. The Federal government operating status is also available on the Office of Personnel Management's website at www.opm.gov. You are expected to check public media, OPM's website, the OpsCenter website, and/or the Employee Information Line to know the current USDA funding status and when to return to work.

If funding is not approved in time to prevent a shutdown, you will receive formal notification of being furloughed. Your supervisor will provide this notification and other furlough information based on guidance from human resources.

Please refer to question number 4 below for your responsibilities at the start of your furlough.

3. Q: I've heard people use the words "exempt" and "excepted" employees – How will I know if I am either?

A: During a furlough some employees are determined to have "excepted" work that must be done regardless of the lapse in funding. "Excepted" work involves the safety of human life, the protection of property, or performing certain other types of work as USDA's legal counsel determines. These types of life and safety responsibilities are sometimes also referred to as "essential" work functions. "Exempt" employees are not affected by a lapse in appropriations. This includes employees who are not funded by annually appropriated funds. Employees performing those functions will generally continue to be governed by the normal pay and leave rules.

Your supervisor will inform you of your status.

4. Q: What do I have to do if we shut down? Do I have to come to the office to do that?

A: As you know, December 24th and 25th are Federal holidays. If you were originally planning to be on leave past that time and USDA is shut down, you will be able to perform your orderly shutdown duties on your first scheduled day to report back to work. On that day, plan to report for duty at your normal time for up to 4 hours to perform those orderly shutdown duties. Please discuss with your supervisor if your shutdown activities can be performed remotely. You will be compensated for time spent in carrying-out the orderly suspension of operations/shutdown procedures after funding is made available.

These procedures include securing confidential information, cancelling upcoming meetings, taking home any food, unplugging small appliances, leaving the furlough status script on voice and email, and posting the furlough status message on customer facing doors. Specifics on these tasks are part of the information that your supervisor will provide you.

If performing any of the shutdown activities requires you to be physically present, then you must come in to the office. Most employees are able to perform the shutdown activities remotely (telework). Except for the furlough voice and email messages, employees may perform these tasks in advance of the potential furlough as part of minimizing their shutdown time and responsibilities.

5. Q: Will I get paid for this last pay period if we shut down?

A: If the government shuts down, the payroll processing schedule is the same. For pay period 25, the National Finance Center will run payroll next Thursday night (Dec 27th). Payments will get transmitted to Treasury, they will certify files that Friday morning, and disbursements will occur as normal.

6. Q: If I am required to come to the office during the shutdown because I am excepted, will I be paid for that time?

A: Yes, employees who perform “excepted” work during the furlough will be paid for that time. Those employees will be paid after Congress passes and the President signs a new appropriations bill or a continuing resolution providing the Federal government with funding.

7. Q: If I do come to the office because I am excepted, will the building be open and safe?

A: Yes, the office building will be open and safe during the furlough. Only employees who have been approved to enter the building due to having “excepted” work will be allowed to enter. Employees coming to the buildings should expect that there will be fewer doors open (use main entrance doors) in consideration of the lower staff numbers. Security personnel will be onsite ensuring safety protocols are upheld. Some of the other building services, such as food service, will be limited, so you should plan accordingly.

8. Q: What happens to excepted and non-excepted employees who have leave scheduled during a shutdown?

A: Employees may not use leave during a shutdown furlough so leave for that time period will be cancelled. Nonexcepted employees will be in furlough status throughout the furlough.

9. Q: Can I apply for unemployment benefits during a shutdown?

A: The U.S. Department of Labor (DOL) is the best source for unemployment compensation information. Their “Unemployment Compensation for Federal Employees” website is at <http://workforcesecurity.doleta.gov/unemploy/unemcomp.asp>. The information DOL provided during the 2013 furlough will be provided to you through your supervisor as part of the furlough information.

It is possible that furloughed employees may become eligible for unemployment compensation. State unemployment compensation requirements differ. Some States require a one-week waiting period before an individual qualifies for payments. In general, the law of the State in which your last official duty station (office location) in Federal civilian service was located will be the State law that determines eligibility for unemployment insurance benefits.

If you receive unemployment compensation and are subsequently paid retroactively for furlough time (Congress approves backpay), any unemployment compensation received must be repaid in accordance with state requirements. Unemployment compensation is coordinated at the state level; this is not a Federal program. Employees are responsible for making repayment arrangements with the appropriate unemployment office.

You should submit questions to the appropriate State (or District of Columbia) office. The Department of Labor’s website provides links to individual State offices at <http://www.servicelocator.org/OWSLinks.asp>. A list of Federal Identification Codes (FIC) needed for unemployment compensation applications can be found here http://www.dol.gov/dol/shutdown/FIC_chart.pdf.

10. Q: What will happen to my benefits (e.g. health insurance) when I am not getting a paycheck? Can I still go to the doctor?

A: Yes, you can still go to the doctor using your health insurance benefits. Employees will continue to be covered under the Federal Employees Health Benefits (FEHB) program, which includes your health, vision, dental and any other benefits you have signed up for through work. This coverage continues even if an agency does not make the premium payment on time due to the shutdown furlough. For more information on benefits, go to: <https://www.opm.gov/healthcare-insurance/Guide-Me/Federal-Employees/>

11. Q: How will I know if it is time to come back to work?

A: Employees are expected to monitor the news. When funding is passed and signed by the President, employees will be expected to return to work. The USDA OpsCenter will remain operational and the website address is <http://www.dm.usda.gov/beprepared/>. This site is updated daily at midnight. In addition, USDA has an Employee Information Line (1-800-932-1902) at which employees may obtain updated information about any shutdown and subsequent termination of shutdown. The Federal government operating status will also be available on the Office of Personnel Management's website at www.opm.gov. We recommend you check these resources often and expect you to check public media, OPM's website, the OpsCenter website, and/or the Employee Information Line to know the current USDA funding status and when to return to work.

12. Q: How soon after we come back to work will I get paid? Will it be the full amount for the time I was furloughed?

A: Any salary payments for time during the furlough will be paid after Congress passes and the President signs a new appropriations or a continuing resolution providing the Federal government with funding. Employees will be paid for their time performing "excepted" work. Non-excepted, furloughed employees will be paid for the time spent in furlough status only if legislation is passed allowing for them to be paid.

Additional information regarding furlough can be obtained from the Office of Personnel Management's website at <http://www.opm.gov/furlough>.

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