

Brunt of federal cuts to hit N.J. with furloughs, airport slowdowns and court closures



By [Mark Mueller/The Star-Ledger](#)

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Call it the calm before the fiscal storm.

Two days after Congress and President Obama failed to reach agreement on a plan to fend off sweeping federal budget cuts, America today is pretty much as it was last week.

Planes continue to take off and land at a brisk clip at Newark Liberty International Airport. Federal courts remain open five days a week. Government employees still draw full pay. Children from low-income families will report to early education programs Monday, just as they did before.

But come next month, officials say, New Jerseyans could see the first substantive impact of "sequestration," the across-the-board reductions that went into effect Friday and that slice \$85 billion from spending through the end of the fiscal year in September.

The broadest impact, officials project, will occur as tens of thousands of employees begin one-day-a-week furloughs across the federal spectrum, from air-traffic controllers and Justice Department attorneys to meat inspectors and civilians who help manage New Jersey's military installations.

Because furloughs require notice of 30-60 days, they are expected to begin in mid- to late April, creating a ripple effect on services and the economy in the coming months.

"The open question is how quickly those impacts are going to become dramatic and noticeable," said John Weingart, associate director of the Eagleton Institute of Politics at Rutgers University. "For some people, there won't be negative impacts, but for most people it's a given."

Judge Jerome B. Simandle, who oversees federal courts in the Garden State, told The Star-Ledger late last week that if Congress and the president don't restore \$332 million in cuts to U.S. courts, he will be forced to shutter courtrooms one day a week, slowing the pace of civil cases and bankruptcies.

Criminal prosecutions could be affected as well, though they take priority over civil cases under federal law.

The Federal Aviation Administration and Democrats in New Jersey's congressional delegation have raised alarms about delays at Newark Liberty and other big regional airports, saying that with fewer controllers and support personnel on hand, the number of flights could be cut dramatically.

Passengers also can expect longer lines at checkpoints.

Marsha Catron, a spokeswoman for the Department of Homeland Security, said the \$1.2 billion lopped from the agency's budget will translate into fewer screeners.

"The sequester would result in reductions in overtime and hiring freezes of transportation security officers across the country, which will increase domestic passenger wait times at our busiest airports," Catron said in a statement last week.

For some in New Jersey, the sting of the federal cuts will be felt even sooner.

Weekly benefits for those on long-term unemployment — or longer than 26 weeks — have been trimmed by 9 percent. For someone who had been taking home \$400 a week in unemployment, the cut shaves off \$36, or about \$144 per month, enough for a grocery trip or two, depending on family size.

Obama, during a press briefing Friday after a fruitless meeting with congressional leaders, called the effect of the cuts a “slow grind,” with impacts mounting month after month.

Perhaps because of the slow-motion rollout — and despite the hot rhetoric in the nation’s capital — many Americans have taken the cuts in stride, professing indifference in a number of recent polls.

Passion over the issue could pick up as more people feel the effects.

For many children in the federally funded Head Start early education program, the ax won’t fall until September because those programs already have received cash for this school year.

The state has about 17,000 children in 28 Head Start programs, according to the Region 2 Head Start Association. About 1,300 of those children are likely to be booted eventually, the White House projected.

“At this point, everything’s on the table,” said Lois Henseler, director of Head Start and Early Head Start programs for NORWESCAP, a private, nonprofit aid group that serves 498 children in Warren, Hunterdon, Sussex and Morris counties.

Once the new fiscal year begins, Henseler said, she may need to consider cutting enrollment, changing programs or closing sites.

“It’s devastating to the families,” she said.

NORWESCAP — which serves about 35,000 people through a variety of programs, including energy assistance and nutrition assistance — stands to lose about \$1 million of its \$23 million budget, executive director Terry Newhard said.

“I think the low-income community is certainly going to feel it,” Newhard said. “If energy assistance isn’t there to help out, if there aren’t food dollars, I can’t imagine it’s not going to affect people.”

Weingart, the Rutgers professor, said Obama and Congress could limit the damage if they can reach agreement soon on an alternate, bipartisan plan to trim spending. But judging by the vitriol spewing from both sides of the aisle, Weingart said he wasn’t especially hopeful.

“The relationship between the House, on one hand, and the Senate and the president on the other is unprecedented,” he said. “So what’s going to happen next? It’s uncharted territory.”

Star-Ledger staff writers Jeanette Rundquist, Jason Grant and Steve Strunsky contributed to this report.

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