

The cost of one day a week

If a state furlough becomes reality, employees lose pay, but days off would be staggered, cutting public impact

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First published in print: Friday, April 30, 2010

ALBANY -- What difference would a day make?

When it comes to a possible furlough of state workers -- a lot, at least if you are one of the estimated 100,000 state employees who could lose a day's pay.

Motorists might face slightly longer lines at DMV offices, or at highway tolls. And state highway crews might be slower to fix potholes.

But the plan, which remains tentative and would require legislative approval, also appears to be designed to avoid major disruptions. That's because state jobs relating to health or public safety -- police, aides in institutions for the disabled, as well as prison guards and nurses -- would be exempted.

There are thousands of state employees performing those roles. According to state data from 2009 on the most populous job titles, prison guards make up 12 percent of the state work force, or 19,572 positions. Health care workers make up another 14 percent, although it's unclear how many are in direct care.

Aside from those jobs, much of the work done by state employees involves activities that have long-term impacts but do not pose an immediate problem with the loss of one day of work a week. The jobs entail processing grants or other forms of financial aid to localities or school districts, or making sure businesses comply with state regulations.

Were those jobs to disappear, problems would occur, but they would likely develop slowly rather than overnight.

As of late Thursday, the fate of the furlough plan proposed by Gov. David Paterson remains unclear. Legislative leaders have expressed grave doubts the plan would survive a legal challenge and Paterson stressed he would rather not order a furlough.

"I'm hoping that that does not have to happen," the governor said in a radio interview Thursday.

Paterson maintains the lack of a state budget gives him the right to advance furloughs. "In order to do that when the budget passes, you would have to re-open the contract of workers to do that," he said. "But what we're saying right now is there's no contract because there's no budget. We feel we can furlough those workers each week."

Paterson has suggested if lawmakers can't settle on a 2010-2011 budget -- now a month late -- he would consider including a one-day furlough in every one-week extender bill sent to lawmakers in order to keep the state operating.

"No final decision has been made as to whether this will be in the appropriation. It is something that he is ready to do, but it should not be considered something that he is going to do," said Paterson spokesman Morgan Hook.

According to a bill that Paterson submitted to the Legislature on Wednesday, furloughs could begin the week of May 10, with agency heads allowed to stagger the actual days the employees stay home. That would help prevent a full shutdown of any given agency.

There is also talk, which the Administration doesn't deny, of up to eight weeks of furloughs. This would happen if there is no apparent progress on completing a budget plan.

With estimates that each furlough of approximately 100,000 people would save \$30 million, eight weeks' worth would bring in \$240 million, close to the \$250 million Paterson said he wants to save from work force costs this coming year.

Initially, the governor wanted unionized employees to give up their 4 percent contractual raises, which were set to begin this month. They said no, but Paterson has delayed the raises.

The furlough idea has been about as welcome as the withholding of raises with the state's major unions, the Public Employees Federation and Civil Service Employees Association.

On Thursday, PEF officials were robo-calling their members and urging them to contact their local Assembly and Senate members, telling them to vote against any budget extenders that include a furlough.

That puts lawmakers in a political squeeze, since by voting no they also would risk being blamed for shutting down state government altogether.

"As a constituent and a state employee, I'm calling to demand that you stop any attempt by the governor to furlough the state work force," reads part of a script that PEF was sending to members for their phone calls to legislators.