

By ROBERT PIERCE

• Leader & Times

Last week, after national lawmakers failed to come to enact regular appropriations or a continuing resolution for the 2014 fiscal year, the federal government went into a partial shutdown.

Among the first to see the consequences of the stoppage in operations was the National Park System, where many stretches of the great outdoors were closed to visitors.



Other effects took place when some of the nation's non-essential government employees were laid off, leaving some people with no choice but to look for work elsewhere to help support themselves and their families.

Some may be wondering what effect a shutdown at the federal level would have on local government. For the most part, Seward County Administrator April Warden said very little would change – at least if the government is only shut down for a short period of time.

Warden said the full impact of the shutdown will depend in large part on the duration of it. She did say, however, that the Seward County Health Department's Women, Infants and Children program, which is federally funded, could suffer should the shutdown be extended for a significant period of time.

Warden said the Kansas Department of Health and Environment does have sufficient funds to cover for the lack of federal funding for about two weeks, but if the shutdown lingers on, a problem could occur.

"They still have some funding in place for the month is what I would think," she said. "The biggest concern is protecting the health and well being of the citizens and minimizing any disruptions."

Warden said state officials are making attempts to communicate and share any information that becomes available with local officials.

"One of the most pressing concerns as you can imagine is the WIC program," she said.

WIC is a nutrition support program that helps young families have healthy pregnancies, encourages and supports breastfeeding and helps insure healthy infants and children. Warden said the program also provides good nutrition and health for children.

With this mission in mind, Warden said this creates a misunderstanding as to what WIC is all about.

"A lot of people think that all WIC is about is pursuing a WIC voucher and sending people on their way, and that's just simply not all that they do," she said. "They provide education to the pregnant women. They help with breastfeeding. They offer nutritional education so that they know how to properly provide good nutrition and health for their children."

Warden said an even bigger concern arises from the fact that WIC participants in Kansas purchase nearly \$1.2 million from more than 300 grocery stores statewide.

“Some of our clients are calling saying if this is going to shut down, their concerns are how are they going to feed their young families,” she said. “Our vendors, the grocery stores and such, are calling, saying they’re somewhat nervous about taking the WIC vouchers. They want to make sure they’re going to continue to receive reimbursements. What we’re trying to do is just keep them informed.”

KDHE issued a statement to WIC vendors in the state assuring them that business as usual would continue.

“The Kansas WIC program is continuing operations as normal,” the statement read. “Authorized WIC vendors should continue to serve WIC clients and deposit redeemed WIC checks. WIC vendors will continue to receive reimbursements. The Kansas WIC program will continue to monitor the availability of federal funds on a daily basis and will send information to vendors well in advance should payment status change.”

KDHE likewise issued a statement to local WIC agencies in the state which said the program is still running.

“In the event of a shutdown of the federal government, the Kansas WIC program will continue operations at status quo,” the statement read. “In other words, employees will continue to come to work, and all current clients will continue to be seen, and new clients and applicants will continue to be certified. Kansas has sufficient funds to continue state and local operations and honor redeemed food instruments (checks) for approximately two weeks. Local agencies will receive updates as things continue to develop in Washington.”

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As far as other county departments are concerned, Warden said until the duration of the shutdown is known, the effect it will have on Seward County will likewise be unknown.

“If it becomes where the duration is a long period of time, more than two weeks, it’s going to affect our WIC department,” she said. “We do employee five individuals. We have three clerk interpreters, an RN and a supervisor.”

Warden said in addition to the health department, the county has many other state funded departments, including Juvenile Correction and Prevention Services and Cimarron Basin Community Corrections. She said in the long run, if state funding is affected by funding at the federal level, the county could be affected as a whole, but the main concern at this time is the WIC program.

Warden added because it is levied county funds, the Road and Bridge department can be sustained with local funding for a longer period of time.