Cosponsor the Fair Compensation for Low-Wage Contractor Employees Act

Sen. Tina Smith

Problem. Since the partial government shutdown began on Dec. 22, thousands of low-wage federal contractor service employees have been furloughed, laid off, or forced to work reduced hours. These employees, who are often janitors, food service workers, or private security contractors, are critical to the functioning of federal agencies, and often work alongside federal employees on a daily basis. Unfortunately, with the shutdown now the longest in history, many contractor employees are struggling to feed their families, pay their bills, or afford medicine.

Seventy-one-year-old Lila Johnson is a good example of the workers we're talking about. Lila is a janitor who works the overnight shift at the Department of Agriculture for just over $20 an hour. She is also raising two great-grandchildren. Since the shutdown began, Lila has struggled to make ends meet because she has been without work – and without a paycheck.

In past shutdowns, federal employees have received back pay to make up for the wages forgone during the shutdown, and that should happen again once this shutdown is over. However, back pay hasn't been extended to contractor employees like Lila, leaving many struggling to get by when the federal government has closed down.

Solution. The Fair Compensation for Low-Wage Contractor Employees Act would compensate contractors for the costs of providing back pay to low-wage contractor service employees who have been furloughed or laid off during the shutdown. In addition, some contractors have forced workers to use their annual leave during the shutdown, so the bill would compensate contractors for restoring annual leave as well. For ease of administration, the bill builds on an existing process used by contractors to recoup other shutdown-related costs.

Bottom Line. Low-wage employees of federal contractors have been denied pay during a shutdown they had no role in causing, and they deserve to be made whole once it is over.