AmeriCorps VISTA Members Receiving Little Pay Due to Shutdown

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The shutdown is having an impact on some young people in northern Michigan. AmeriCorps VISTA members work for non-profits for a year, all while living on a stipend that covers just their necessities. As the shutdown lingers on, they say they are only receiving a some of their pay. A downside for many of the VISTAs is that per AmeriCorps policies, they aren’t allowed to take on a second job whatsoever, so on top of their lack of pay, they have no opportunity for any type of extra income.

“October 1st, the day of the federal shutdown, we received an e-mail from the President of the national organization just explaining that we were still required to show up to work, and all the policies that come with being a VISTA still apply,” explained Mary O’Neil, an AmeriCorps VISTA in Traverse City. That e-mail also said they would be accruing their pay and the benefits during the shutdown. “They just couldn’t tell us when those were going to be paid out,” O’Neil says. They’ve had no communication with the organization, unless you count the portion of pay they did receive last week, which was just over $200. It’s left many in question of the entire situation.

“We don’t know why, or if that’s going to continue, if our next pay period will be the same. It’s just the most frustrating part is just kind of a lack of communication,” says O’Neil. Two-dozen or so VISTAs work all over Traverse City, at the United Way, Rotary Charities, TBAISD, and Seeds. Their supervisors say they’ve been consumed with worry over the past two weeks.

“We were concerned about our VISTA members and whether they’d be able to pay some of their bills,” explains Sarna Salzman, the executive director of Seeds. Despite brainstorming ways they could possibly help out, they realized their hands were tied.

“What’s really frustrating is that we would like to be investing this kind of attention in the programs that we’re here to offer, rather than managing the freak out the whole government is under right now,” Salzman says.

As the shutdown continues, the VISTAs say all they’ll be keeping a close eye on their wallets, and Washington. “It’s really frustrating to see that there really isn’t a sign that’s it’s going to be coming to any sort of resolution soon.”

While none of the VISTAs have been faced with a crisis yet, O’Neil did mention some VISTAs have had to cancel trips home, due to the cost of gas.