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## Coming together with support during shutdown

By Alex Wilson Key West Citizen

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Racquel Rojas, foreground, Managing Director of the SOS Foundation Food Pantry at 5640 Maloney Avenue, and AmeriCorps VISTA contractee Paige Volpenhein replenish food shelves at the Stock Island distribution center on Thursday. (CAROL TEDESCO/The Citizen)

A number of Florida Keys businesses and organizations are reaching out to furloughed government employees to offer assistance during what has become the longest government shutdown in U.S. history.

Recognizing that the shutdown affects not only furloughed workers, but also their families, participating organizations include the Star of the Sea Foundation, the Florida Keys Outreach Association, the Community Foundation of the Florida Keys, Burton Memorial United Methodist Church, and Keys Area Interdenominational Resources.

"We want everyone to know that local resources are available to assist individuals and families during this uncertain time," said Leah Stockton, President/CEO of United Way of the Florida Keys. "For some people, this may be the first time they have ever needed to ask for assistance, but please know that we are here, willing to help, and are honored to serve those who serve our country."

The SOS Foundation is keeping their food pantries' shelves fully stocked in preparation for an influx of furloughed federal workers and Coast Guard personnel.

"We're offering fresh produce, meat, cereals, pasta, canned goods and Publix gift cards," said Raquel Rojas, manager for

the SOS Stock Island Food Pantry, which was featured on CBS News this week.



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Racquel Rojas, Managing Director of the SOS Foundation Food Pantry, stocks shelves of food at the Stock Island distribution center, which she says served 50 military heads-of-household between Monday and Wednesday this week. (CAROL TEDESCO/The Citizen)

The Community Foundation has sequestered \$30,000 in grocery cards to be distributed via the Chief Petty Officers Association, and they've donated \$10,000 in grocery cards to SOS so far.

In addition to SOS, the FKOC in Key West and Burton Memorial United Methodist Church in Tavernier are also offering food assistance via pantries or gift cards.

While the organizations recognize food is important, families' dinners aren't the only thing that's affected by a lack of a paycheck. Emergency financial assistance for basic needs, such as medical care, rent, utilities and childcare costs are also available for furloughed employees. The FKOC and KAIR are offering assistance via an application process, in which aid-seekers will need to show employee identification from an agency impacted by the shutdown.

While non-profit organizations are an excellent source of support for the community, they aren't the only groups pitching in. Private businesses, such as First State Bank of the Florida Keys, Caroline's Café and Tropic Cinema are also offering assistance in their own way.

First State Bank is offering loans for furloughed federal government employees, and the loans have no interest, fees or credit pull, and they offer same day funding. Furthermore, they are also offering deferrals for existing loans if needed.

"First State Bank appreciates the service of our federal employees and wants to try and ease the hardship placed on them during this shutdown," said Karen Sharp, President and CEO of First State Bank. "In a situation that is out of their control, we trust this will give them some peace of mind to be able to at least remain in control of their daily needs and finances."

Tropical Soup and Caroline's Cafe contributed 16 \$100 gift cards for employees at the federal courthouse on Simonton Street.

"It's a pleasure to help them, because they support us under normal circumstances. We just want to be part of this as Key West pulls together at this time," said Robert Robinson, general manager for Caroline's Café.

In addition to organizations and businesses, individuals are also getting involved to support furloughed employees. A Facebook fundraiser dubbed "Friends for Furloughed – This is EFF'd Up" has set a goal for \$50,000, and in seven days it's raised \$3,975. The fundraiser, set up by Larry Blackburn, Bernadette Restivo, Karen Vaught, Amy Culver and Rich Malafy, aims to use the money raised to purchase gift cards for those affected by the shutdown.

“Many of our Florida Keys Government employees, including the Coast Guard, are furloughed due to the government shut down,” reads the fundraiser’s page. “That means many are working for no pay, or are not able to work at all. No one knows when this will end and many of us are completely frustrated by this dire situation, and want to help.”

Meanwhile, some businesses know that a little fun or family time is needed during a crisis. The Tropic Cinema in Key West is offering free movie tickets on Saturday for Coast Guard members and family, good for any movie.

The government shutdown continues to be in effect as Congress and President Donald Trump remain at an impasse over the appropriations bill for the 2019 fiscal year. Trump has refused to sign any funding measures to reopen the government unless they include at least \$5 billion in funding for the border wall.

All federal employees are affected by the shutdown, although many such as the Coast Guard, Transportation Security Administration, and IRS employees are expected to continue working without getting paid. The Coast Guard is the only branch of the Armed Services affected, as it’s oversight was moved from the Department of Defense to Homeland Security in 2002.

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