

After a month of shutdown, US workers turn to food banks

New York, United States

Most never needed help from a food pantry. But a month since the US government shutdown began, dozens of federal employees have been lining up in Brooklyn for basics.

Customs, tax and emergency management officials are all among the crowd, having gone unemployed since December 22.

Others deemed "essential" like transportation workers or prison guards are forced to continue working without pay, taking advantage of their lunch breaks to stock up.

Volunteers are manning distribution tables in the lobby of the New York borough's Barclays Center, which usually hosts concerts or sporting events rather than charity drives.

Those in need first register and then fill plastic bags with canned goods, potatoes, chicken, grapes and basic toiletries.

"I came here to grab some goods, to be honest," said Antoinette Peek-Williams, an employee of the Homeland Security Department, who came an hour by subway from Harlem.

"Any way I can save money and put towards something else -- that's what I am trying to do."

Since the budget impasse began, the 62-year-old lives "day to day -- watching what I eat,



Customs, tax and emergency management officials are all among the crowd, having gone unemployed since December 22

watching what I spend, not spending."

"Praying that they make a decision sooner than later."

She hopes to return to work on February 1 -- an optimism of which she's no longer so certain.

"I am a person where the glass is always half-full," said the mother of a college student.

"I have to stay hopeful," she said. "If you don't have hope, you don't have anything."

It's a sentiment echoed by Chante Johnson, a tax administrator.

But "it's getting rough," the 48-year-old said. "It's coming, like, to the end of everything."

'Unprecedented'

She provides for a daughter



Furloughed federal workers gather bags of food and milk as the Food Bank For NYC holds food distribution for federal workers impacted by the government shutdown in Brooklyn, New York

along with her mother, and says she hasn't been able to sleep or eat healthy since being out of work.

"I just want them to open it up," she said. "Start talking and open up the government."

For those federal workers forced to work without pay, the situation is even more tense.

They can only testify anonymously, sworn to confidentiality. "It is very stressful," said

one 39-year-old single mother, who works as a prison guard at Brooklyn's federal detention facility.

She came to the food pantry on her lunch break seeking enough to prepare a few meals.

Her daughter is nearing the end of high school, and as students apply for universities, she laments being unable to pay her child's application fees. She managed to postpone

the monthly bill for her cell phone -- which she needs for work -- albeit with a late penalty.

But she won't be able to make it after mid-February.

"After that I won't be able to go to work," she said, saying she won't have money to fill her car's gas tank.

The shutdown has exacerbated an already precarious situation in a city where soaring rents

are pushing more and more families into poverty, said Francisco Tezen, head of development at the Food Bank for New York City.

The non-profit, the city's largest food assistance organization, hosted the distribution along with corporate sponsors.

"Something like this is unprecedented, it's almost equivalent to times when we have had to activate response and services in response to a disaster," said Tezen.

"Just the length of period of time, and the volatility and the unknowns."

Organizations like his "can be of assistance and help," he said -- "but we are not an antidote to gridlock or just bad policy."

He refrained from pointing specific blame for the political stalemate, but many in New York, a Democratic stronghold, pin culpability on Donald Trump.

In Johnson's view, the border situation is not dire enough to require the \$5.7 billion the president has demanded to build a wall.

"What happened? Did a Mexican beat him up as a little boy so he is so gung-ho on this wall?" she asked. "Talk about it and get us back to work."



Alone in a jungle

India's Modi recounts self-discovery solo jungle trips

New Delhi, India

Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi has claimed he used to spend days "reflecting" alone in the jungle, in a new interview.

Modi, who secured a landslide poll victory in 2014, has long touted his remarkable backstory that saw him rise from humble origins as the son of a tea seller to become India's leader.

Modi shared further details of his hardscrabble life on Tuesday, telling the popular Humans of Bombay Facebook page that he regularly left home to seek solitude during the Hindu festival Diwali.

"Not many people know this, but I would go away for the five days... somewhere in a jungle," Modi said. "I would pack enough food to last for those five days. I would reflect... People often asked me, 'Who are you going to meet?' And I would say, 'To meet myself.'"

Modi also spoke candidly about his early life, saying he grew up with "a great need to look sharp and groomed"

"I would pack enough food to last for those five days. I would reflect... People often asked me, 'Who are you going to meet?' And I would say, 'To meet myself'

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despite his family's meagre earnings.

"Even though we couldn't afford an iron, I would heat some coal, use an old 'lota' (rounded vessel)... This was the beginning of everything that I am today and I didn't even know it at the time," he said.

Modi has used his simple origins to contrast himself with Rahul Gandhi, the scion of the Nehru-Gandhi dynasty that has dominated Indian politics for decades, who is leading a resurgent opposition to polls expected by May.

The prime minister has been a champion of Hinduism and Indian culture, last year publicising the yoga exercises he said were key to his fitness regimen.

Gandhi family scion takes a plunge into India's political fray

Congress leader Rahul Gandhi names popular sister Priyanka Gandhi Vadra to party post

Reuters | New Delhi

Congress leader Rahul Gandhi appointed his charismatic sister Priyanka Gandhi Vadra to a senior party position yesterday that officials say will energise the campaign to oust Prime Minister Narendra Modi in the national election expected in a few months.

Priyanka, 47, has campaigned for the Congress party in previous elections to help her brother, but largely stayed in the wings, letting her brother fully take the mantle of the Nehru-Gandhi dynasty that ruled India for most of its post-independence era.

Bearing a striking resemblance to her grandmother and former prime minister Indira Gandhi - who was known as "India's iron lady" - Priyanka will be a Congress general secretary for Uttar Pradesh, the most populous state and key to the national poll.

"We will play politics on the front foot," Rahul Gandhi told reporters. "I am very happy my sister, who is very capable, will work with me."

Priyanka will oversee the eastern part of Uttar Pradesh, including the city of Varanasi, one of Modi's political constitu-



Priyanka Gandhi Vadra adjusts her flower garlands as she campaigns for her mother Sonia Gandhi during an election meeting in Uttar Pradesh (file)

encies, the Congress party said in a statement.

Priyanka is seen as a more natural campaigner and a bigger draw than her brother, who appeared wooden during the last election.

"We want to congratulate the Congress party on this move. Basically, they are saying Rahul has failed, now they need his sister," said BJP spokesman Sambit Patra.

The siblings' great grandfather, Jawaharlal Nehru, was India's first prime minister following independence from Britain in 1947. Their grand-

mother, Indira Gandhi, succeeded him after a brief interval. After she was assassinated by her Sikh bodyguards in 1984, her son, Rajiv Gandhi, took over as premier.

Rajiv was killed by an ethnic Tamil suicide bomber while campaigning for a general election in 1991.

His Italian-born widow, Sonia, initially resisted calls to enter politics before taking the plunge and lifting Congress' flagging fortunes under her family's brand name. Sonia Gandhi stepped back as her son took the reins of the party.