



United States Senate Floor Speech

Office of Senator Susan Collins

January 23, 2019



**Senator Collins:** Thank you Madam President.

Madam President, government shutdowns, regardless of which party controls Congress or the White House, are always harmful to federal employees and their families who struggle to pay their bills without paychecks; to Americans who need help from closed government agencies; and to our economy, which is damaged by the decline in consumer spending and consumer confidence. Ironically, Madam President, they also always end up costing taxpayers more money than if government had been funded on time. That is why I have always worked to end shutdowns.

In 2013, for example, I convened a bipartisan group of which the presiding officer was the very first member that produced the plan that led to the reopening of government after a 16-day shutdown. During the past month I have had numerous discussions with colleagues on both sides of the aisle as well as with White House officials on what we can do to reopen government. At the same time, I have been working to mitigate the impacts of this shutdown as much as possible for the hundreds of thousands of federal employees and their families. These families are being unfairly and seriously harmed and they have no idea when they will receive their next paycheck. Right around Christmas, I worked closely with the White House to ensure that the Coast Guard received pay for their prior work, prior to the shutdown work, when an anomaly in the pay system put their paychecks at risk.

In addition, Democratic Senator Ben Cardin and I sponsored a bill to guarantee back pay to federal workers affected by this shutdown. Our legislation was passed by both chambers and signed into law by the president.

I have also joined Senator Ron Johnson from Wisconsin in introducing the *Shutdown Fairness Act* that would ensure that federal workers that are deemed essential and required to come to work each day are paid on time despite the partial government shutdown. It is simply not fair to force employees to work and not pay them, and I hope that this bill too will become law.

Madam President, as you are well aware after 33 days, the longest shutdown in history, it is long overdue for all sides to come together to engage in constructive debate and compromise to end this standoff. Shutdowns represent the ultimate failure to govern and should never be used as a weapon to achieve an outcome.

Now, Madam President, here's what does not reopen government: Political ads do not end shutdowns. Overheated and inflammatory statements do not end shutdowns. An unwillingness to budge and a lack of specific proposals do not end shutdowns. What will end this shutdown? Remembering the real harm that this shutdown is causing. Putting specific proposals on the table so that the Administration, Republicans, and Democrats, in both the Senate and the House, can see signs of good faith and compromise. Voting on specific proposals and trying to get to yes. That is what is necessary to end shutdowns.

Madam President, finally over the weekend the president submitted a plan to end the shutdown

which the Senate will consider tomorrow. His legislative package avoids the “chicken and the egg” dilemma of whether we should reopen government first or whether border security measures should be considered first. It combines all of those issues in one package that would reopen government, strengthen the security of our borders, change some immigration rules for the better, and some, in my judgment, for the worse, and provide disaster relief funding.

The administration's package would reopen government for 800,000 federal employees, including hundreds of thousands who work at the FBI, the TSA, Border Patrol, Coast Guard, and the DEA who had been working without pay to protect us from terrorists, drug cartels, and other criminals. It provides disaster funding to address devastating hurricanes, wildfires, earthquakes, and volcanoes. The bill also makes border security investments and includes some immigration changes. It is important to note, Madam President, that all of the remaining appropriations bills are incorporated into this package, and thus, this bill would fully reopen government until September 30, the end of the fiscal year.

I would also note that these seven bills either passed this chamber or the Appropriations Committee last year with widespread, bipartisan support. The Transportation, Housing and Urban Development bill that I authored with my good friend and colleague, the Ranking Member Senator Jack Reed, is a great example. At its core this is a bill that creates jobs, strengthens communities, improves our infrastructure, and helps low-income families, veterans, seniors, and those who are homeless with their housing needs. This bill passed the Senate in August by an overwhelming vote of 92 to 6 as part of a four-bill package. It should be law.

This shutdown is harming low-income families and seniors across the country. Funds for housing repairs and disaster recovery have been stopped from being allocated to areas of critical need. Public housing agencies and multi-family property owners in Maine and across the country are scrambling to line up short term loans and other financing to try to fill the gap caused by a lack of HUD funding. Since the shutdown began. Nearly 42,000 households, most of which are comprised of low-income seniors or disabled individuals, have not had their rental assistance renewed, and millions more are at risk the longer the shutdown continues.

Just this morning, the City of Portland contacted me to express alarm over the 1,700 housing vouchers serving 3,500 people who will be affected on March 1<sup>st</sup>. Statewide, that number is in the vicinity of 10,500 hundred vouchers affecting many thousands more vulnerable individuals and families. The problems unfortunately go well beyond housing vouchers because most HUD staff have been furloughed had has been unable to correct computer errors that are keeping local shelters and small nonprofit groups across the country that assist the homeless and victims of domestic violence from access and their grants.

Maine's eight domestic violence shelters are about 75 percent funded by the federal government. If this shutdown continues, how can they continue to serve the women and children who are escaping abuse and violence?

While there is never a good time of year to be at risk of losing one's house or to be unable to find a shelter if one finds oneself homeless or to be able to escape domestic violence and abuse, the middle of the winter is an especially cruel time to face a housing crisis.

Madam President, the shutdown is also challenging for our nation's air traffic controllers to remain on the job, dedicated to the safety of every flight, despite missing paychecks. Our nation's air traffic controllers and safety professionals work in a system that has no room for error. Regrettably they are now enduring financial strain in jobs that are already very stressful. So many other important functions of the federal government, operating our national parks and the tourism based support;

ensuring the safety of the food that we eat; preventing hunger; avoiding drugs shortages; processing tax refunds; addressing the opioid epidemic; providing access to loan guarantees for small businesses and homeowners all would be addressed by re opening government. Let me provide just a few examples from my state of Maine.

I have heard from physicians in Portland about emergency shortages of critical drugs. We cannot reach the FDA, which is where we would normally turn for assistance, because of the furloughs. Instead, we are contacting the manufacturers to try to get help. A small Maine-owned architectural and engineering business in western Maine has contracts with 10 federal agencies. It will very soon not have enough work for its employees because it's not being paid by these agencies. A smoked salmon facility in Hancock, Maine, cannot operate because it lacks a vital certificate from the FDA. Seniors at the Maine Maritime Academy are unable to take their licensing exams, which will delay their job searches significantly, and current merchant mariners who need to renew their licenses cannot do so. The Coast Guard, which is so important to my state and the state of the presiding officer, is not being paid, and yet its members are required to work to perform absolutely vital tasks and they cannot be absent to take on another job to pay the bills. And of course like many of my colleagues I have talked with so many TSA employees in Bangor and in Portland who are having difficulties paying their bills, having to take out loans or rely on family or friends, and yet they are so devoted to their important mission that they show up for work day after day after day despite not being paid.

Madam President, in addition to reopening government, the legislation also includes investments and policies to lessen the problems at our southern border. Ninety percent of the heroin that is flooding into this country is coming from Mexico, some through the legal ports of entry that lack the technology to detect these drugs, some smuggled across the border outside of ports of entry. Physical barriers have proven to be an effective deterrent in many areas where they have been built such as San Diego and El Paso. That's why Congress and two previous administrations on a bipartisan basis authorized and built more than 600 miles of walls, fences, and other barriers by January 2017, an often overlooked fact.

In fact, Madam President, to listen to this debate you would think that there were no barriers along our southern border, and that is not true. There are more than 600 miles of physical barriers. In some places they don't make sense, but in some places they have proven to be an effective deterrent. Republicans and Democrats voted to support the construction of these physical barriers in 2006.

As recently as last June, the Senate Appropriations Committee passed again on a bipartisan basis a Homeland Security funding bill that would have provided the money for additional physical barriers at the border. The package before us that we will vote on tomorrow would supplement this existing infrastructure by providing funding for an additional 234 miles of barriers at high priority locations identified by the experts at Customs and Border Patrol. So, Madam President, we already have more than 650 miles of physical barriers. What this bill would provide is funding for 234 additional miles of fences, walls, and other kinds of barriers physical barriers that have been specifically identified as needed by the experts at Customs and Border Patrol. The bill would also provide \$800 million to meet the urgent humanitarian needs of those who are crossing the border as well as additional funding for new border patrol agents, immigration judges, and customs officers. Again you rarely hear any discussion that this package includes \$800 million for humanitarian assistance as well as funding for personnel, for technology, for canines, for sensors. This has to be a multi pronged approach to be affective.

The package also takes some preliminary steps to alter our broken immigration system. We need to focus on the DREAMer population, those young people who were brought to this country by a parent, usually at a very young age. I so remember a conversation I had with a DREAMer who lives

in Portland, Maine, and attends the University of Southern Maine. He was brought to this country by his parents when he was age 4. He had no idea that he was not an American. He thought he was born in Portland and had lived his whole life there. It was only when he was going to apply for his driver's license that his parents told him the truth. The fact is like so many other DREAMers, this young man has known no other country but America. Many of the DREAMers are going to school, working, serving in the military, or otherwise contributing to our country. Now this legislation does not go as far as I would like, but it would at least provide relief for three years to the 700,000 young immigrants who are enrolled in the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrival, or DACA, program.

Frankly, I would prefer giving these young people a path to citizenship provided that they have abided by and continue to abide by our laws. We also need to help those legally receiving temporary protected status, the so-called TPS population. Many of these immigrants have been in the United States for years, even decades working hard, creating jobs, and becoming established and valued members of their communities.

On the other hand, Madam President, some of the asylum changes proposed in the president's bill are problematic. Allowing people to apply for asylum in their home countries appears to me to be a good idea, but raising the bar to qualify for asylum needs much more study. Madam President, the plan put forth by President Trump is by no means ideal, but it would result in the reopening of government, my priority, and the outlines of a compromise are before us. I urge my Democratic colleagues to also put forth a specific plan that addresses all of these issues.

Madam President, compromise is not a sign of weakness. It is a sign of strength particularly when hundreds of thousands of families are being harmed. The administration and Senate Republicans and Democrats have the opportunity to resolve the stalemate before 800,000 federal workers and their families, dedicated public servants, miss yet another paycheck and our economy is further damaged. Shutdowns harm too many innocent federal employees and their families as well as vulnerable citizens, homeowners, small businesses, and rural communities.

This shutdown must end. Thank you Madam President.