

SB 722

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## **SB 722 Testimony**

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Chair Taylor, Vice-chair Knopp, members of the committee--thank you for giving me the chance testify today in support of Senate Bill 722.

Though I technically lived through 7 government shutdowns between the year I was born in 1983, to 1996--the longest being 21 days under President Clinton—you can probably guess by my age that none of them really meant anything to me, because I was too young to intellectually grasp what they were. It wasn't until the 16-day shutdown under President Obama in 2013, however, that I really got it. I was an employee of the Unemployment Benefits unit for the State of Utah, and I took phone calls for two weeks from furloughed workers across multiple agencies, unsure of how long the shutdown would last or how they would pay their bills in the meantime. Even with the suspicion they'd be retroactively paid—the inhumane sense of dread inflicted upon workers of what should be the most stable employer in the world—the United States government—really hit me. The furloughed employees could still file, however, and though the shutdown lasted 16 excruciating days, people had some assurance of how to meet their obligations.

This most recent federal shutdown however--lasting an unprecedented 35-days--retriggered hundreds of thousands of people across the country; many of them right here in Oregon. And

though furloughed workers could still file for the security blanket of unemployment compensation to get them through the gap—this shutdown was different. It saw thousands of workers nationwide compelled to work full-time while receiving no pay for over a month, until a “someday-promised” retroactive check would hit their bank accounts. This group of people, from air traffic controllers to border control agents, found themselves in a position of having no means to get them through a shutdown of an indefinite timeframe, while also continuing to incur the costs associated with working—such as transportation and childcare.

As a newly-minted state representative of a district proud of its Coast Guard station status--all up and down the coast from Astoria to Tillamook--we had over 1,000 U.S. Coast Guard members impacted by this event. Many of those members had families to provide for, and many fell into the category of more than half of Americans that don't have at least one month's worth of living expenses in savings. The overarching effects of these members no longer contributing to the local economy through grocery shopping, coffee shop visits, and clothing purchases also created a deeply-felt ripple effect across the community.

I had the opportunity to meet many of these impacted families and hear their stories. In spite of the challenges presented by being unable to file for unemployment insurance—which a number of Coast Guard families told me would have made all the difference to them in that shutdown—several rather industrious Coast Guard wives, with the help of a local non-profit, put together and ran an amazingly well-organized food pantry for those forgotten families over several of the weekends during the shutdown. I know, because I volunteered there.

But who cares, right? The shutdown is over, and all of those people have been retroactively paid. Maybe we all saw the need for this *during* the shutdown, when it was conceived, but where is the need for SB 722 now? Well, as one of the Coast Guard wives told me that weekend I volunteered at their popup food pantry—they, and many others, are still in “the eye of the storm.” The shutdown put them into such a perpetual state of unease and anxiety, they feel that the same sort of partisanship existing at the federal level now could easily reignite and throw them back into the hurricane. And whether that’s tomorrow or three years from now—they’re rethinking their decision to work for our federal government. The least we can do is ensure parity between those furloughed and receiving some semblance of stability, and those who must work but receive none.

Politics aside for why the shutdown happened, I feel at my very core the need to ensure that this injustice done to our public servants—people compelled to work without pay, who put their very lives on the line—never happens again. There have been 21 shutdowns since 1976, but four of those have occurred within the last 5 years. Heck, three of those have been within the *past year*. These events aren’t one-offs anymore.

SB 722 is the solution that lets Oregon ensure, at least for our part, that our federal employees residing in our state are not forgotten. Additionally, like unemployment insurance, the payment to recipients generally goes right back into the community—providing an element of economic stabilization that is so important to keeping the economy overall from stagnating, which is the reason unemployment insurance was created in the first place. As for the “lift” this would require on Oregon’s part? The dash 5 amendment to this bill creates an effective and efficient safety net for people to intuitively access unemployment insurance, should this ever happen again. The dash

5 also gives the State of Oregon a means for recouping costs once folks are retroactively paid, which has generally been the case in past shutdowns.

As a chief co-sponsor to this bill, it has deep meaning for me on multiple levels. This is my first shutdown where I'm not just taking calls from people who are impacted—but I'm actually in a situation to do something about it. And we *should*. We lose very little by putting this infrastructure into place, we can take shelter in its sideboards to recoup our costs. Most importantly, it saves us and our constituents the anxiety of figuring out what to do if this happens again.

And hopefully it doesn't—but I'm looking forward to us being preemptively prepared, rather than caught off guard again. And, if anything, it sends a clear message to all Oregonians that we are looking out for our folks. Thank you.