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STYLE

That Essential Difference; Majority of House Employees Escape the Shutdown  
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So who's essential, anyway?

Judging from the activity in the office buildings of the U.S. House of Representatives yesterday, the answer must be: darn near everyone!

Congressional aides were scurrying through the halls. They filled the House restaurants (run by a civilian company), though the Senate's were closed. They crowded the elevators, which ran just without elevator operators. Drivers of the underground trains connecting the Capitol and legislative office buildings were dismissed originally, then summoned back yesterday.

In Speaker Newt Gingrich's congressional office -- 2428 Rayburn -- flocks of people moved to and fro; there was laughter emanating from a back room amid clicking computers and ringing phones.

"No!" said a stern receptionist, when asked if these workers could be interviewed concerning the exact nature of their essentiality; she referred inquiries to the speaker's office over in the Capitol building. "We have several people in that office. Anyone can help you," she said.

The government may have shut down nonessential activities such as the Smithsonian's Air and Space Museum -- indeed, you could have landed a light plane at Third and Jefferson streets on the Mall yesterday afternoon -- but apparently it takes a lot of essential government to make a nonessential government shut down.

And who's to say what's essential, anyway? Rep. John T. Myers (R-Ind.), chairman of the House "Gym Committee," was on a three-member panel that closed the facility as part of the shutdown. Yesterday morning, the House gym was reopened. Myers resigned his

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...t, a spokesman said, and beyond that there was no comment -- though doubtless the dramatic inside details will one day be known to history.

"Everyone is essential in our office," said Andi Dillin, press secretary for Rep. Bill McCollum (R-Fla.). "We're continuing to hold hearings and do legislation, so the legislative aides are needed. The chief of staff is needed to oversee everything. The press secretary is needed to answer the questions of the press."

Even the people who answer the phones, she added, must stay on duty because "it's essential we let the constituents know what's going on."

Apparently, most congressional offices are following these same rough guidelines -- just keep everyone merrily toiling away as if nothing has happened. Dillin said she'd attended a meeting of congressional press secretaries where "just a few" raised their hands when asked if there were furloughs in their offices.

Things were different at the White House, where officials said only 43 of 400 employees were allowed to work. The rest could not even work for free. Working, one official said, incurs "obligations" to the government, and the government cannot incur obligations if it has no authority to pay.

A White House official also said people cannot "volunteer," because that is a provision of work without compensation or congressional authorization. White House stay-at-homes were told they cannot even call their offices to check on work.

On the Hill, "90 percent of the offices are maintaining a full operation," said Michael S. Erlandson, administrative assistant for Rep. Martin Olav Sabo (D-Minn.). In Sabo's office, he added, "the congressman feels all the people are hired because they are essential."

Erlandson elaborated, saying that everyone from receptionist Miriam Barrett "to myself as chief of staff is essential for different reasons, but they all relate to the congressman trying to get his job done."

"Oh, my God!" said a voice from behind a high telephone console; this turned out to be an intern, Chris Mulloy.

"I am essential because," Mulloy started saying in response to a reporter's question, when the AA politely but firmly cut her off.

"I don't think we should interview the interns," he said,

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ling. "We're not going to send the interns home and say they're nonessential: It's an educational process for them to be here and observe all this."

According to Erlandson, one of the few congressional operations taking the shutdown thoroughly to heart is that of Rep. Bill Luther (D-Minn.). Indeed, the National Journal's CongressDaily reports that Luther issued a statement saying, "It would be inappropriate for Congress to exempt itself from the effects of the situation."

"His office should be open, let me call over there for you," suggested receptionist Barrett.

A visit to Luther's office in the Longworth Building revealed a bundle of mail on the marble floor in front of the locked door, upon which Luther himself -- or, perhaps, some lingering essential staff member -- had posted this notice in bold lettering:

"Congressman Luther is temporarily out of the office. The congressman's staff has been furloughed due to the shutdown of the federal government. If you have an appointment or wish to have an appointment with the congressman, please call (202) 225-2271 to have a message for the congressman. We apologize for the inconvenience. Thank you."

And freshman Rep. Michael P. Forbes (R-N.Y.) sent everybody in his office home except himself: "The White House and Congress are currently deadlocked over a plan to balance the federal budget," his answering machine explained.

"I will continue to remain on the job, [but] because spending authority has now expired . . . I am compelled to close my congressional office until an agreement is reached," he said. "I regret any inconvenience to you."

Forbes himself, waylaid outside the chamber after a vote, admitted that "it's not been easy," but "maybe we'd have an agreement if all the staff went home and we started to feel like every other federal employee."

What are the guidelines here, anyway?

"I did a study of my office," said Rep. John Conyers Jr. (D-Mich.), interviewed while catching an elevator in the Rayburn Building, "and found that everyone on my staff was more essential than me -- so I declared myself nonessential and furloughed myself."

Actually, under the House rules, to the extent they can be

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ertained at this point, Conyers could probably do that if he wanted. According to memos issued by Rep. William Thomas (R-Calif.), chairman of the Committee on House Oversight, "nonessential House operations" must be shut down as determined by "the appropriate government officer."

Who, naturally, "has always been the member."

This being government, each furlough requires an "Authorization for Furlough of Employees."

"It's still very difficult for me to write out the furlough sheets for the employees we're furloughing," said Donna L. Brazile, administrative assistant to Del. Eleanor Holmes Norton (D-D.C.), shaking her head sadly and admitting she hadn't done it yet.

Brazile said she had to go to Norton and argue for her own essentiality: "I said I was essential. She said, 'Why?' I said I was essential because I had to administer everything and shut down the offices and follow the appropriation process."

It worked.

The essential criterion of essentiality in the House, the mas memos stress, turns on whether an employee's responsibilities "are directly related to legislative activities."

Which suits Jeff P. Nelligan just fine. "What makes me essential is we had a bill on the floor last night -- the ICC Termination Act -- and we're getting hundreds of calls from all over the country," said Nelligan, leaping up enthusiastically from his computer yesterday.

Nelligan works for the Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure under the chairmanship of Rep. Bud Shuster (R-Pa.); on his computer screen at that very moment was a press release on the \$6.5 billion National Highway System bill, which, Nelligan nimbly explained, "is to the 21st century what the interstate highway system is to the 20th."

Essentiality? "Everyone's essential," he said, "everyone here."

"Am I essential?" said Frank Record, a Republican staffer on the Committee on International Relations, who was shooting the breeze with a friend in the Rayburn cafeteria. "No one's told us to go home yet. We're all waiting. I could use a little vacation."

learby, a woman putting ketchup on her hamburger asked not to

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identified, but said she's a staff assistant on a House Subcommittee, adding: "I don't know how essential that is, but there it is. I do basic office procedures, like answering the phone and filing, so I guess that makes me essential."

She ate an onion ring. "We're not getting many calls. We get the regular in-house calls, but we're not getting too many outside calls, but they said we were essential."

She kept eating onion rings, thinking it over. Finally she said:

"I mean: We don't have much to do today."

Staff writers Guy Gugliotta, Howard Kurtz, Stephen Barr and Ann Devroy contributed to this report.

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PHOTO,,Dudley M. Brooks

CAPTION: GOP committee staffer Frank Record, who wasn't sent home, says, "I could use a little vacation."

----- INDEX REFERENCES -----

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