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NEWS

Interns help pick up slack at White House

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THE BUDGET SHOWDOWN; LIFE WITHOUT GOVERNMENT

White House life during the shutdown: President Clinton orders in pizza for dinner as first lady Hillary Rodham Clinton vacuums the dustballs that are accumulating in the corners of the Lincoln Bedroom.

Well, not exactly.

While the federal budget showdown has idled 800,000 federal employees and shuttered the nation's most popular tourist attractions, it hasn't meant serious lifestyle changes for the Clintons.

The 70-member staff that runs and maintains the White House has been trimmed to 16.

Still on duty in the East Wing are a day chef and an evening chef, a day butler and an evening butler, two day housekeepers and an evening housekeeper, two ushers, two electricians, four engineers and a computer specialist.

On Capitol Hill, members of Congress aren't facing many personal inconveniences from the confrontation, either. The elevator operators have been sent home and the Senate cafeteria closed.

But most congressional staffers have been designated "essential" by their bosses so they can continue to work.

In contrast, Clinton has made deep cuts in his West Wing staff of aides. He has reduced the 430 full-time employees in the Executive Office of the President to a skeleton crew of 90.

Hillary Clinton furloughed 12 of her 16 staffers.

and even if Congress passes the appropriations bill that funds

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White House, Clinton won't sign it, aides say. He'll argue that his office shouldn't be back in operation until the rest of the government is, too.

So, absent as of Thursday evening:

-- A receptionist to greet visitors in the West Wing lobby.

-- Stenographers to record and transcribe the president's every word.

-- Sit-down meals in the most exclusive of capital lunchrooms, the White House mess. It was open for take-out only.

At the National Security Council, a spokesman said the need to deal with immediate crises had delayed planning for such future events as Clinton's trip to Europe in 10 days.

If the shutdown continues for long, plans to install Christmas decorations and prepare the White House for nearly 150,000 guests invited to holiday parties could be in trouble.

The White House staffers who are working find themselves depending on a newly empowered cadre of youthful, unpaid interns. Clinton strolled around the halls Thursday to thank them.

Meanwhile, those who aren't working - and are prohibited by law from doing their jobs on a volunteer basis - have slept in and have started doing Christmas shopping.

About 20 furloughed members of the first lady's staff got together to volunteer at a local soup kitchen Wednesday.

A sizeable group of the president's staff toasted their non-essential status at a Tex-Mex restaurant Tuesday night. Afterward they went to a sneak preview of the new movie, An American President.

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