

EPIC EXPLAINER: Reductions in Force and the Government Shutdown

Shutdown-related RIF notices are not automatic mass layoffs; their effectuation depends primarily on Congressional funding.

A Federal Government Reduction in Force

A federal government reduction in force, or RIF, is the elimination of federal employee positions as authorized under federal civil service law ([5 U.S.C. §§3501-3504](#)). RIFs are typically associated with a reorganization, shortage of funds (most often the result of Congressional appropriations), or a lack of work (resulting from improved efficiencies or reduced agency needs).

Agencies must follow specific RIF rules, including providing employees with 60 days'¹ notice that their position is being eliminated. Agencies must also follow required prioritization of positions based on factors such as tenure, veteran status, and performance.

RIFs can be issued to any career civil service employees in the competitive service, with [limited exceptions](#) such as members of the Senior Executive Service and political appointees. Executive Branch agencies generally decide when a RIF is necessary, which positions are affected, and the timing of implementation.

The Office of Personnel Management (OPM) is responsible for issuing guidance to agencies on RIF procedures. The most recent guidance was issued in [March 2025](#).

What Is the Role of RIFs in the Current Government Shutdown?

A government shutdown—more accurately described as a [temporary slowdown of non-essential government activities](#)—occurs when Congress fails to pass legislation to fund the government. When this happens, programs whose funding is subject to the lapsed annual appropriations are required to halt operations, with exemptions for certain essential activities.

Based on [current agency plans](#), about a quarter of the federal civilian workforce could be deemed non-essential and subject to a furlough.

A RIF is distinct from a government shutdown, but when Congressional Democrats [blocked](#) the passage of a [clean Continuing Resolution](#) bill that would have funded the government at current levels through November 21, 2025, the White House's Office of Management and Budget (OMB) sent instructions to agencies to begin planning for a government shutdown, including potential simultaneous RIF notices.

¹ When a RIF is caused by an unforeseeable circumstance, agency heads may request approval from OPM to provide a shorter notice period, with a minimum of at least 30 days' notice.



As the [OMB memo](#) noted:

“With respect to those Federal programs whose funding would lapse and which are otherwise unfunded, such programs are no longer statutorily required to be carried out. Therefore, consistent with applicable law, including the requirements of 5 C.F.R. part 351, agencies are directed to use this opportunity to consider Reduction in Force (RIF) notices for all employees in programs, projects, or activities (PPAs) that satisfy all three of the following conditions: (1) discretionary funding lapses on October 1, 2025; (2) another source of funding, such as H.R. 1 (Public Law 119–21) is not currently available; and (3) the PPA is not consistent with the President’s priorities.”

A [subsequent OPM memo](#) on shutdown procedures specifies how the RIF process is a distinct process, and thus employees will receive separate notices regarding shutdown-related furloughs and RIFs. Not all furloughed employees will receive RIF notices, and some employees excepted from furloughs may still receive RIF notices.

The ultimate effect of RIFs, which would occur 60 days after employees receive RIF notices, is dependent upon Congress’s eventual enactment of fiscal year 2026 appropriations. As the [OPM memo explains](#): “Once fiscal year 2026 appropriations are enacted, agencies may consider revising their RIFs as needed to retain the minimal number of employees necessary to carry out statutory functions. Any proposed RIF plan must be submitted to OMB.” If the government is funded at pre-shutdown spending levels, it is likely that many more employees will receive RIF notices than will actually have their positions eliminated once appropriations are eventually enacted. Depending on the final appropriations bills, it is even possible that no RIFs will be realized.

Democrats’ \$1.5 Trillion Shutdown Demands Could Backfire

By holding federal employees’ paychecks hostage to their demands to [increase federal spending by \\$1.5 trillion](#), Congressional Democrats risk a smaller government than the status quo. A prolonged shutdown could demonstrate agencies’ ability to operate more efficiently while still carrying out their statutorily required duties with significantly fewer people, thus providing justification for Congress to reduce funding. Moreover, even if Congress ultimately funds the government at current spending levels, the process of conducting RIF plans could result in reduced work through newfound efficiencies that would justify RIFs even absent a reduction in funding.

Summary

A RIF is a process by which federal agencies eliminate positions due to reorganization, a lack of work, or a shortage of funds. RIFs are separate from furloughs during a government shutdown, and affected federal employees will receive separate notices for each. In the current shutdown context, RIFs are not mass layoffs as the OPM and OMB instructions note that the effectuation of RIFs is dependent upon Congress passing a fiscal year 2026 funding bill. However, Democrats’ insistence on \$1.5 trillion in new spending, rather than a clean funding bill, could backfire by resulting in reduced funding and RIFs that would otherwise not occur.