

Hoyer, Van Hollen: No more cuts to federal workforce

Look elsewhere for deficit reduction, D.C.-area lawmakers say

By Matthew Hay Brown

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As the fiscal cliff looms, two of Maryland's most influential congressmen have a message for those looking to the federal workforce for more savings: Look somewhere else.

"Federal workers have already been asked to sacrifice as part of the budget cuts that have already taken place," Rep. Chris Van Hollen, the top Democrat on the House budget committee, told reporters last week. "Now is the time to ask others to help share responsibility for reducing our deficit."

Van Hollen spoke days after Rep. Steny Hoyer wrote an op-ed urging negotiators: "Don't Throw Feds Over 'Cliff.'"

"Over the past two years, federal employees have repeatedly faced threats of a government shutdown that would stop their paychecks with virtually no notice," Hoyer, the No. 2 Democrat in the House, wrote in Federal Times. "The looming automatic budget cuts in January would almost certainly require unpaid furloughs in most agencies."

The one-two punch by Hoyer and Van Hollen, each of whom represents thousands of federal workers in a district adjoining the District of Columbia, came as President Barack Obama and House Speaker John Boehner remained far apart in their talks to keep the economy from tumbling over the fiscal cliff.

Lawmakers scheduled cuts of \$1 trillion to take effect beginning Jan. 2 to prod themselves to reach a deficit reduction deal by the end of the year. With the sides still far apart, federal agencies have begun making plans to furlough workers, slow new hiring and suspend programs.

The message from Hoyer and Van Hollen was part of a larger effort by federal workers, their unions and their supporters in Congress to tell the negotiators they have given enough.

They say increased pension contributions, pay freezes during 2011 and 2012 and a delayed pay increase in 2013 have added up to \$103 billion in savings.

Washington-area House members from both parties stressed that figure last month in a letter to Obama, Boehner and Democratic Leader Nancy Pelosi.

"Federal and postal employees and their families share our commitment to serving the American people in the most efficient, cost-effective manner, and just like other taxpayers, they, too, are struggling during these tough times," they wrote. "Our dedicated civil servants understand the principle of shared sacrifice and justifiably expect others will actually share in it."

The letter was signed by Hoyer, Van Hollen, Reps. Donna Edwards and John Sarbanes of Maryland, and members from Virginia and the District of Columbia.

The challenge for federal workers is that there are no popular ways to reduce budget deficits. Republicans oppose increasing tax rates. Democrats oppose cuts to entitlement programs. Federal workers are one of many groups telling the negotiators to look elsewhere for savings.

Hoyer, whose Southern Maryland district includes Naval Air Station Patuxent River and associated operations, says government workers have been unfairly stereotyped as "overpaid, underworked and concentrated mainly around Washington."

"On the contrary," he wrote: "According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, federal employees are paid less than their private-sector counterparts."

Nor do most work in the Washington area. Federal workers, Hoyer wrote, responded to the victims of Sandy in New Jersey, fight wildfires in Colorado, protect the borders in Texas and Maine and support uniformed military personnel at bases across the country.

"Instead of treating federal employees as a convenient offset," he wrote, "we should recognize them for what they are: An outstanding asset."