



University of Vermont  
Center for Community News

## Assignment Template: Covering the government shutdown

The Center for Community News' mission is to grow and support partnerships between college reporting programs and local news outlets. CCN has created a series of sample templates for faculty to give to students to contribute local news to their community. Faculty are welcome to use any and all of these and amend them as they see fit for their classes. For questions about this template, contact Elizabeth Hewitt at [lizmhewitt@gmail.com](mailto:lizmhewitt@gmail.com).

### Notes for Faculty

**WHAT:** This template provides an overview of how students can cover a shutdown of the federal government from a local angle.

**WHY:** This assignment teaches students how to localize a breaking and evolving federal level story.

**HOW TO USE THIS TEMPLATE:** This assignment is best for intermediate or advanced students who are comfortable approaching strangers for interviews and are able to turn around copy on a deadline. This can be completed by one student, or as part of a pair or team.

#### EXAMPLE STORIES:

- Round-up of local impacts: [Many mid-Missouri agencies remain open despite federal government shutdown](#), by Nyvia Brown and Kaleb Anderson, Columbia Missourian, Oct. 1, 2025
- Go to a place and report: [Montezuma Castle National Monument turns away tourists after government shutdown](#), by Gabrielle Wallace, Cronkite News, Oct. 1, 2025
- Call current or former officials/experts for reactions: [Keeping Grand Canyon National Park open during a shutdown puts Arizona's gem at risk, ex-superintendent warns](#), Grace Berry and Isabella Gomez, Cronkite News, Oct. 1, 2025

## About CCN

The [Center for Community News](#) at UVM is a nonpartisan nonprofit that is working to grow and strengthen university-led reporting programs around the country, to create a more sustainable future for local news outlets and the communities they serve.

## Assignment: Covering a federal government shutdown

Shutdowns of the federal government occur when Congress fails to pass a bill funding government operations. Typically, shutdowns are the result of a stalemate between political parties in Congress. The length of a shutdown is determined by how long it takes for Congress to authorize a new funding package, which can vary. The longest shutdown to date in U.S. history occurred in December 2018-January 2019 and lasted 34 days. The previous shutdown in January 2018 lasted just two days.

Federal shutdowns impact many aspects of the federal government, but have varied impacts in different agencies. In general, services like the U.S. Postal Service continue to operate because they are self-financed. Other operations are deemed “essential” and continue as normal, though employees are not paid. Many services will be reduced or will close until the shutdown ends. See this [BBC explainer for more information on the October 2025 shutdown](#).

While the politics of shutdowns happen at the national level, many impacts are felt at the local level. In this assignment, you’ll cover how a government shutdown is impacting a local community.

### Instructions

**Step 1:** Plan your approach. Think about what federal operations are significant in our region. Is there a national park or monument? Are there major federal offices or sectors that operate in your region? Who are possible people you could talk to? Think of people who are currently dependent on affected federal government services, or people who formerly led affected federal agencies.

Do some preliminary research and make some preliminary phone calls. Are there any messages posted on websites of the federal agencies you’re looking at? Are the major federal sites or agencies in your area answering the phone?

**Step 2:** Write out a reporting plan. In your plan, clearly identify the specific aspect of the federal shutdown you plan to explore in the area. List any sources you will contact, and any places you might go.

**Step 3:** Report your story.

If you’re reporting on the impact of a shutdown on a particular place, like a national park, go to the park. Interview any people who are there, like visitors or people who work there (if there are any employees there). Take lots of notes of observations, and take photos or video while you are there

If your story is more centered on government services than a particular place, make phone calls.

**Step 4:** Write your story. Use a combination of facts and data, quotes from interviews, and observational details.

**People you can interview:**

- Members of the public directly impacted by disruption of federal government services
  - Visitors to national parks, monuments or forests
  - People who receive impacted federal benefits. For example, Social Security is not cut, but there are likely to be delays because of the shutdown
- Current state or municipal officials whose departments are impacted by disruption of federal funding
- Leaders of organizations impacted by disruption of federal services
- Former leaders of local federal sites impacted by the shutdown
  - Former heads of certain national parks, monuments or forests

**Questions you can ask:**

- For current or former local, state or federal officials:
  - How is the current federal shutdown impacting operations of this agency here?
  - How are members of the public likely to notice the shutdown?
  - How did previous shutdowns impact services?
- For members of the public:
  - How does the shutdown impact you?
  - What do you think of this shutdown?

**Definitions:**

- shutdown – “A government shutdown occurs when Congress fails to pass or the president refuses to sign a spending bill to fund the federal government’s operations. This results in a funding gap that can cause several government functions to be temporarily disrupted.” Source: [USAFacts](#)
- Mandatory programs – Programs that continue to operate during a government shutdown. For more information, see the [National Council of State Legislatures Federal Government Shutdown resource page](#)
- Discretionary programs – Functions that federal agencies must discontinue funding for until the passage of a new spending package. For more information, see the [National Council of State Legislatures Federal Government Shutdown resource page](#)

**Word Count:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Deadline:** \_\_\_\_\_