

## Federal budget ax will have local impacts

Full effects won't be felt immediately

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Friday is the deadline for Congress to head off long-feared, but increasingly inevitable budget cuts across a swath of domestic and military programs. But without a quick deal, how might Napaans feel the pinch, and when?

Local school, social service and veterans' support figures saw little risk of an immediate doomsday for area programs after the expected arrival of "sequestration," the imposing of across-the-board cuts to multiple federal funding programs.

But some worried about the consequences to teachers, tenants, veterans and others should the bitter divide between Democrats and Republicans over whether to attack the federal deficit through new revenue or deeper program cuts lingers deep into the spring or summer.

"It's hard to plan when no one has any specific details," Lark Ferrell, the city of Napa's housing manager, said Wednesday. "I just hope things aren't as drastic as they may be. I'll hope for the best."

The sequester is an assortment of federal spending cuts set to take effect Friday, agreed to by the Democratic-majority Senate and Republican-led House in a 2011 compromise to allow a rise in the debt ceiling and avoid a default. Originally set for Jan. 1, the reductions were postponed two months by Congress to head off a "fiscal cliff" feared if they took place at the same time as the expiration of income- and payroll-tax cuts.

Sequestration reportedly would remove \$42.7 billion from defense programs and the same amount from civilian services, the bulk from discretionary programs. Most mandatory social services will not be affected by a sequester, including Medi-Cal, welfare, food stamps and disability payments, according to federal officials.

Among services in line for cutbacks, however, is the Women, Infants and Children nutrition program, which provides grants to states for food and health-care support of low-income pregnant women and new mothers.

The U.S. Postal Service also is not slated for service reductions, because it receives no federal funding and relies on sales and service for its income.

Service groups that contract with Napa County Health and Human Services can expect to lose up to \$250,000 through September, but the effect should be minimal on the department's \$88 million annual budget, according to Director Randy Snowden.

Possible federal cuts in the department's funding could include about \$17,000 out of \$20 million marked for mental health services, \$50,000 from its \$4.7 million allotment for substance abuse treatment and prevention, and \$60,000 from the agency's \$17 million allowance for work-force

investment, officials said.

“For us, it could be like, ‘OK, we won’t buy new chairs for our conference room’ or ‘We’re not having that training session,’” Snowden said, adding that he foresees no elimination of services or reduced hours.

At the Napa Valley Unified School District, March 1 will have no immediate impact on local schools for the rest of the current school year, but a federal budget standoff lingering deep into the spring still could slice into the district’s finances in 2013-14, according to Assistant Superintendent Wade Roach.

Without a federal funding deal, “We’re looking at about a 6 percent cut spread over two programs: Title I funds (which pay for teachers, aides and parent liaisons for students from low-income families) and special education,” he said Wednesday. “We’re in budget development now, so we have to make up our minds by mid-May because we have to set a budget in June.”

Uncertainty over the level of school funding also could complicate Napa Valley Unified’s decision on how many layoff notices it must issue to teachers, counselors and other classroom staff. School districts must issue the notices to teachers and other credentialed employees by March 15, then have two months to confirm or retract the layoffs.

Also up in the air, according to Roach, is the school district’s bid to renew grant funding for its three magnet schools: Harvest Middle School and the Napa Junction and Pueblo Vista elementary schools. Napa Unified was scheduled to file its federal grant application Thursday.

Housing support in the city of Napa could show the most obvious pain if the federal budget sequester lingers toward the end of the federal fiscal year in September, according to Ferrell.

Federal Housing and Urban Development department money supports the Section 8 program, which Napa and other cities use to subsidize rent for low-income residents. A 6 percent cut in Section 8 payments could force the city to revoke 73 rent vouchers — which Ferrell warned would strike at some of the town’s most vulnerable clients, including veterans, the elderly and the disabled.

“You can’t cut 6 percent off all the voucher; you have to cut off 6 percent of the people,” she said. “... We’d have to act because we don’t have sufficient reserves to carry 6 percent more people than we have funding for. It wouldn’t last long, only a few months at best.”

The Pathway Home in Yountville, which treats about 15 former service members suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder, is a privately funded nonprofit, and thus would see no direct hit to its finances or services. But its founder, Fred Gusman, worried about the longer-term effects from one aspect of the military funding reductions — the loss of up to \$3 billion for the Defense Health Program, which includes money for researching into post-traumatic stress disorder and traumatic brain injuries.

With a generation of soldiers returning from Middle Eastern wars with damaged brains or psyches, Gusman said, an interruption of medical research could make the work of treating veterans harder for military and civilian care providers alike — even if the effects are not immediately seen.

“That’s the problem: It’s not doing something directly to (politicians) and so they don’t get it,” he

said Tuesday. “We’re starting to learn more about how to deal with (PTSD); let’s not stop now just because the two parties can’t agree on stuff.”