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## FEW Washington Legislative Update March 1-15, 2024

**Congress averts another government shutdown and 2025 budget updates:**

### **In Congress:**

The Senate [passed](#) another short-term spending bill that punts the March 1, shutdown threat to later in the month, but leaves questions about how Congress will fund the government through the rest of the year. Senators voted 77-13 to send the funding measure to [President Joe Biden's desk](#) for his signature, just hours after the House voted overwhelmingly to pass the bill 320-99 and just a day before a tranche of government funding was set to expire. The House vote had the support of 207 Democrats and 113 Republicans.

The stopgap bill will maintain funding for the departments of Agriculture, Interior, Transportation, Housing and Urban Development, Veterans Affairs, Energy, Justice, Commerce, and other offices through **March 8**. Lawmakers will now have until **March 22** to wrap up fiscal 2024 funding for the Pentagon, the legislative branch, and foreign operations, as well as the departments of Labor, Health and Human Services, Education, State and Homeland Security.

The new two-date funding patch still saves the most challenging bills for last, punting on funding for the Pentagon, Department of Homeland Security, federal health programs and many other agencies that typically spur partisan feuding over both spending levels and policy. Lawmakers will still have to agree on these spending measures, and then try to pass them individually over the next three weeks, or face yet another potential shutdown.

Congressional leaders on Sunday, March 3, finally [released](#) long-awaited bipartisan bills ([TEXT](#); [SUMMARY](#)) to fund parts of the government for most of the year, setting off a

sprint to avert looming shutdown threat in less than a week. The weekend rollout entails six full-year spending bills to fund a number of agencies until early fall, including the departments of Agriculture, Interior, Transportation (DOT), Housing and Urban Development (HUD), Veterans Affairs (VA), Justice (DOJ), Commerce and Energy. The 1,050-page [bipartisan package includes](#) more than \$450 billion in funding for fiscal year 2024 and lawmakers have until Friday to pass the legislation or risk a partial government shutdown under a stopgap plan President Joe Biden signed into law this week to buy more time for spending talks. Among other items, the package sets aside nearly \$100 billion for the HUD and DOT funding bill, with Democrats highlighting increases for the Federal Aviation Administration, the Maritime Administration and Homeless Assistance Grants, among other areas.

The bill also includes over \$32 billion for tenant-based Section 8 vouchers, a \$2.1 billion increase from the previous fiscal year. At the same time, House Republicans say the bill cuts more than \$3.2 billion across 19 DOT and HUD grant programs when compared to the previous year's fiscal levels. The bill provides more than \$135 billion in nondefense discretionary funding for the annual VA and military construction funding measure and more than \$172 billion in mandatory funding. The bill also includes funding increases for VA Medical Care, the Benefits Administration, as well as medical and prosthetics research.

The release of the package – which is [backed by the top Democrats and Republicans](#) in both chambers – represents a breakthrough for negotiators.

On Tuesday, March 5, the House Oversight and Accountability Committee [introduced the bipartisan Federal AI Governance and Transparency Act](#) which would set up requirements for agencies to notify individuals when certain government decisions are meaningfully influenced by AI and provide the option for an alternative review process via existing appeals channels.

On Friday, March 8, [the Senate averted a partial government shutdown](#) by passing six spending bills. The 75-22 vote comes after the bipartisan passage of the same bills in the House on Wednesday, March 6. Federal spending for the current fiscal year has been determined for several agencies, most notably the housing and transportation departments. In addition, the package of bills addresses a major concern of counties: states removing people from Medicaid when they are incarcerated.

On Monday, March 11, President Joe [Biden proposed](#) spending billions of dollars more to increase housing and to reduce homelessness as part of his \$7.3 trillion spending

plan for the next fiscal year. [Biden's 1,298-page proposal](#) addresses a wide range of issues, including a number of programs to help cities and states ease the housing crisis.

### **Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion:**

#### **Working-Class People Rarely Have a Seat 'At the Legislative Table' in State Capitols**

In her first few months as a Minnesota state legislator in 2021, state Rep. Kaela Berg often wondered: "What the hell am I doing here?"

A single mother and flight attendant without a college degree or prior political experience, Berg now had a seat at the legislative table, shaping policy decisions in her home state. As she ran against a former two-term Republican representative — a commercial real estate agent — she also was struggling for housing and living in a friend's basement.

"I'm living in [her] basement, running for office, and the pandemic hits," said Berg. "I went from three jobs to one. ... I found that while I can pay my bills, I can't qualify for a new apartment because you have to show two or three times the rent and I can't do that."

While it was gratifying to receive support from working families in her district, her transition to state policymaker felt overwhelming.

"I had the worst case of impostor syndrome," Berg, a member of Minnesota's Democratic-Farmer-Labor Party, said in an interview. "I'm thinking, 'Who do I think I am? I'm a working flight attendant. I don't have a college degree. Why did I let somebody talk me into this?'"

Berg is a rarity in politics: a working-class state legislator. Just 116 of the nearly 7,400 state legislators in the United States come from working-class backgrounds, according to a biennial study conducted by Nicholas Carnes and Eric Hansen, political scientists at Duke University and Loyola University Chicago, respectively.

The researchers define legislators as "working class" if they currently or last worked in manual labor, service industry, clerical or labor union jobs. They found that 1.6 percent of state lawmakers meet that definition, compared with 50 percent of U.S. workers. Only about 2 percent of Democrats and 1 percent of Republicans qualified as working class.

Ten states — Arkansas, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, Oregon, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, Utah, and Virginia — have no working-class state lawmakers.

The dearth of working-class legislators raises concerns that economic challenges such as wage stagnation and the rising cost of living will get short shrift in state capitals.

Working-class politicians are more likely to have personally experienced economic hardship, so they are more interested in policies to mitigate it, Carnes said. And they often propose solutions that differ from those put forward by colleagues who aren't working class, even if it means diverging from party doctrine.

“State legislatures make consequential decisions, and if you have an entire economic class of people that are not in the room when policy decisions are being made, that's going to tilt the kind of problems politicians pay attention to,” said Carnes. “It also dictates the kinds of solutions they consider against the interests of whoever's out of the room.”

Working-class representation in state legislatures has always been low, he noted, but the most recent count is even lower than it was two years ago, when the percentage was about 1.8 percent.

The state legislature with the highest percentage of working-class lawmakers is Alaska, with 5 percent — that's three of 60 lawmakers. Maine has the highest total number of working-class legislators, eight of 151 legislators, with a transportation worker and a bartender among the ranks.

### **Working-Class Issues**

After a 32-year career as an electrician, Democratic state Rep. Nate Roberts was part of a new wave of first-time Idaho lawmakers entering office in 2023.

Roberts knew that it wasn't just his relative political inexperience that separated him from the rest of his colleagues.

He also was one of the only state lawmakers who had worked a union job. And during his first few weeks in office, he was shocked by how rarely issues such as wage theft, low pay and housing affordability had been talked about in committee meetings.

“That's when I realized that the only person that's going to advocate for working-class people is a working-class person,” he told Stateline. “When I moved from state to state

working different jobs, I realized how differently states were influenced when it came to policies for working people.”

Roberts learned the power of unions as a journeyman — and fighting to increase worker protections has become his life, he said.

Idaho is one of 26 so-called right-to-work states, where no person can be forced, as a condition of employment, to join a union. Such laws limit unions’ bargaining power.

Roberts would like Idaho to follow the lead of Michigan, which in 2023 became the first state in decades to repeal a right-to-work law. That is unlikely in Idaho, given the state’s conservative political orientation. But Roberts also is pushing to update Idaho’s child labor laws, which were enacted in 1907 and have been superseded by the federal Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938.

Roberts said his experience as a laborer in his younger years has emboldened him to speak out against legislation such as a Senate bill that would repeal limits on the number of hours and how late in the day a child under the age of 16 can work.

“I’m still shocked when I get pushback for going against these bills, particularly ones that I feel regress our child labor laws,” said Roberts. “I’ve experienced it. We need to not only protect our kids, but we also need to protect our workers.”

The political climate is far different in Minnesota, where the Democratic-Farmer-Labor Party has controlled the governor’s office, the state House, and the state Senate since January 2023. Last year, the state enacted a major package of labor-friendly laws.

Minnesota also passed a slew of tenant-landlord laws, with protections favoring the state’s renters.

Berg said the backgrounds of working-class legislators like herself can inform statehouse conversations, even if lawmakers with different backgrounds support pro-labor policies.

“I don’t think there’s enough value in having people with lived experience in the legislature,” Berg said. “When you take someone who ... still lives paycheck to paycheck, they are bringing that personal experience to fight for a bill that will impact working families.”

For Wisconsin state Rep. Jenna Jacobson, joining the legislature in 2023 was a lot like “drinking from a fire hose,” she recalled.

One of her policy priorities — expanding aid for free school meals — was influenced by her experience as a schoolkid.

“I was one of the kids on free and reduced lunches growing up. I had the special-colored cards because of that,” said Jacobson, a Democrat. “I know so many of our kids who are in a similar spot.”

### **Barriers Abound**

For working-class Americans, financial and societal barriers are a major disincentive to pursuing state offices, said Amanda Litman, co-founder and co-executive director of Run for Something, a progressive organization that recruits candidates for down-ballot races.

A 2021 national survey by Tufts University found that local candidates who experienced poverty in their youth felt especially constrained.

“Structurally, it’s really hard for people who aren’t already rich, or already independently wealthy, have rich partners or rich families to enter politics,” Litman said. “And the gatekeepers at the state level have typically recruited candidates who were safe bets, which is a candidate who can independently raise money.”

The eligibility criteria for statewide offices vary greatly by state. Only five states — Arizona, Connecticut, Hawaii, Maine, and Minnesota — allow public financing options for candidates vying for state legislative seats.

Becoming comfortable wielding political power as a working-class person is a transition that can take a while, Indiana Republican state Rep. Peggy Mayfield told Stateline.

Mayfield, who worked as a secretary at the insurance company she and her husband owned together, is now a 12-year veteran in the legislature who knows how to navigate state politics and get bills passed.

But running for office, much less holding state office, is time-consuming and requires sacrifices, she said.

“If I had an employee who came to me and said, ‘I wanna run for office,’ I’m faced with saying, ‘I’m gonna let you off four months a year,’ or make a difficult choice,” said

Mayfield, describing how hard it is for many workers who don't have that privilege. "Running for office itself becomes a full-time job ... and for some in the working class it may not make sense to go into politics, if they can pursue more profitable opportunities in the private sector."

Some states have worked to raise legislative pay, which could entice more working-class people to take a shot at elective office.

Earlier this year, Kansas raised salaries for rank-and-file lawmakers from about \$29,000 to \$57,000 after some said the lower pay wasn't enough to live on. Arizona, Kentucky, New Jersey, and Vermont are among the states with measures this session that could increase lawmakers' pay.

New York passed legislation in 2022 that made its lawmakers the highest paid in the country. Pennsylvania has cost-of-living adjustments.

Roberts, the electrician-turned-lawmaker in Idaho, said: "We don't do this for the pay, and some of us certainly aren't getting rich off this job. Some of us are making ends meet.

"But we have residents who are also making ends meet, and they rely on us to speak on the issues affecting them, and that's what keeps you going," Roberts added.

Lawmakers in Idaho make \$19,927, after a pay raise passed in 2022.

Another barrier for would-be working-class lawmakers, Carnes said, is running a viable campaign against more established political candidates. The working class needs infrastructure and coalition-building to compete politically, he said, similar to women candidates who get support from EMILY's List (a pro-abortion rights group).

"The solution is pretty straightforward," said Carnes. "If you commit to working-class people and partner with labor unions and political parties on recruiting and training working-class people to run for office — it's possible you will see more working-class state legislators."

In Minnesota, Rep. Berg soon realized that her best legislative asset was her ability to vouch for the working experiences of everyday Minnesotans.

A flight attendant for Endeavor Air, Berg has signed on to a bill that, among other provisions, would delete the exemption for air flight crews in the state's law on

employee sick time. Her experience allowed her to confidently explain to legislative peers how the exemption had hurt flight crews.

“Government works best when all types of personal experience are at the legislative table,” Berg said. “I knew that I was uniquely able to speak on issues that my other colleagues never experienced.”

Sourced From: [\(Route Fifty\)](#)

## **FEW Washington Legislative Update – March 1-15, 2024**

### **Tier I**

#### **Biden Proposes ‘Historic New Program’ to Address Childcare Shortages**

As part of his budget proposal on Monday, March 11, President Joe Biden is asking Congress to make childcare more affordable for the parents of 16 million children around the country.

The president is requesting a \$500 million increase in Childcare and Development Block Grant funding, which states use to lower the cost of childcare for low-income families and raise childcare provider wages.

But advocates say it’s not enough to stabilize the nation’s childcare system, which has been teetering ever since the nearly \$40 billion in childcare subsidies approved under the American Rescue Plan Act expired at the end of September.

To date, more than a quarter of providers have had to cut salaries, according to a national survey by the National Association for the Education of Young Children. A similar share also reported serving fewer children. Since the subsidies ran out, advocates warned that as many as 70,000 programs could ultimately close, affecting more than three million children.

As a result, states like Virginia, Connecticut and Indiana have been scrambling to keep childcare centers open.

Biden’s proposal would give providers some help, said Patricia Cole, senior policy director for the advocacy group Zero to Three. But it wouldn’t be enough.

She applauded a separate proposal in Biden’s budget to create “a historic new program” in which households making up to \$200,000 would receive subsidies to pay



for childcare. According to the proposal, most parents would pay just \$10 a day. Low-income families would receive free childcare.

The new program would mainly benefit parents, Cole said, adding that, although the administration has not released details of the proposal, it could still include much-needed funding to raise the salaries of childcare workers.

To stabilize the industry, though, Cole said Congress would have to approve the \$16 billion that Biden requested last year to restore the ARPA childcare subsidies for providers as part of the current fiscal year's spending. Biden is expected to continue seeking the funding as part of supplemental funding separate from the normal budget legislation. But Congress does not appear to be considering such an increase.

Cole said the childcare grants could also see a slight increase in the final six appropriations bills the House and Senate are currently negotiating.

"It will not be enough to stave off the problems that the system is facing right now," she said. "But every bit helps."

Senate Appropriations Committee Chair Patty Murray, D-Wash., praised the proposal during a hearing on Tuesday for "tackling the childcare crisis like I have long championed, so working families nationwide can find the child they care they need for about \$10 a day."

Sourced From: [\(Government Executive\)](#)

## **FEW Washington Legislative Update – March 1-15, 2024 Tier II**

### **Biden Proposes 2 percent Raise For Feds in 2025 Budget**

President Biden's fiscal 2025 budget proposal, released Monday, would institute an average 2.0 percent pay raise for federal civilian employees next year, a significant decrease from each of the last two years.

The figure marks a departure from the president's 2023 and 2024 budgets, which proposed some of the largest pay increases federal workers had seen in decades. The 2023 average pay raise of 4.6 percent was the highest since the George W. Bush administration, while this year's 5.2 percent average raise marked the largest since the Carter era.

Though the White House did not specify how the raise would be split between across-the-board increases to basic pay and an average boost to locality pay, traditionally presidents have set aside 0.5 percent of the total figure for locality enhancements.

In a statement to Government Executive, the Office of Management and Budget said the 2025 raise figure reflects financial headwinds facing agencies, and the administration will supplement the raise with other reforms to federal personnel compensation.

“The budget includes a pay adjustment of 2.0 percent, building on significant increases in 2022, 2023 and 2024 while accounting for the fiscal constraints federal agencies face in fiscal 2025,” OMB wrote. “The administration continues to prioritize federal compensation and also looks forward to working with Congress to address long-standing issues of pay compression, which impact employees at various levels throughout the government. By continuing to pursue structural improvements and use of flexibilities, we will enhance the competitiveness of the federal pay system.”

The news received a steely reception from unions and other federal employee groups, many of whom have already signed onto a competing congressional proposal to provide federal workers a whopping 7.4 percent pay increase next year, 3.4 percent of which is devoted to locality pay boosts.

“The average 2 percent federal pay raise in the president’s proposed 2025 budget is unacceptable,” said National Treasury Employees Union (NTEU) National President Doreen Greenwald in a statement. “Federal employees are the backbone of our country, yet they continue to be underpaid. Like many Americans, frontline federal workers face increasing costs that stretch their families’ budgets to the breaking point, and this cannot continue. NTEU supports a fair pay increase that reflects the contributions of the federal workforce and takes meaningful steps toward closing the 27.54 percent pay gap between federal employees and their private sector counterparts.”

Biden’s budget also appears to do away with a longstanding Democratic priority in maintaining parity in pay increases between civilian federal employees and members of the armed services. By contrast, the president’s fiscal 2025 budget proposes a 4.5 percent pay raise for military service members.

“The budget funds a robust 4.5 percent pay raise for America’s servicemembers, continuing to build on the highest pay raise in decades of 5.2 percent in 2024,” the proposal states. “The budget also provides servicemembers with annual rate increases for both housing and subsistence allowances.”

Everett Kelley, national president of the American Federation of Government Employees, explicitly called out the administration for abandoning this policy.

“We are extremely disappointed in the way this budget turns it back on the longstanding practice of pay raise parity for civilian and military employees of the federal government,” he said. “A 4.5 percent increase for civilian workers, as requested for our colleagues in the military, would reflect the Employment Cost Index and would at least be a nod toward compliance with the Federal Employee Pay Comparability Act. Civilian federal workers right now are working for 27.5 percent less than their private-sector counterparts. A paltry 2 percent raise for civilian federal employees will do very little to close that widening gap.”

Sourced From: [\(Government Executive\)](#)

## **FEW Washington Legislative Update – March 1-15, 2024 Tier III**

### **Nearly Half of Men Believe the Pay Gap Is ‘Made Up,’ Survey Finds**

It can be hard to argue for remedies to a problem when there’s still a debate about whether that problem exists. This dilemma has stymied advocates decrying issues that range from climate change to discrimination. And a new poll from SurveyMonkey, revealed first by TIME, shows that a significant belief gap exists when it comes to the issue of equal pay.

According to an online poll of 8,566 American adults conducted in March, nearly half of men (46 percent) believe that the pay gap “is made up to serve a political purpose,” rather than being a “legitimate issue.” And about a quarter of men ages 18 to 34 (24 percent) say that media reports of men and women being paid unequally are “fake news,” one option provided in the poll. Overall, 62 percent of Americans believe that men make more money than women for similar types of work, with men and younger Americans most likely to incorrectly say that there is no gap in pay.

According to the latest data from the U.S. Census Bureau, women in America are on average making about 81 cents for every dollar that a man makes. April 2, 2019, is Equal Pay Day, a date chosen to symbolize how far into the year a woman must work in order to make what a man did the year before.

“There are loud voices invested in saying this is a made-up problem,” says Emily Martin, who oversees work related to education and workplace justice at the National Women’s Law Center. “The status quo is very good at defending the status quo. That means there are powerful megaphones being used to say ‘Nothing to see here, everything is fine. If women are making less, it’s really because of their choices.’”

### **Explaining the gap**

Research suggests that factors such as experience, hours worked, and the different occupations women and men tend to have help drive discrepancies in pay. But about a third of the pay gap is “unexplained.” And advocates say it’s a mistake to think that the rest of the gap isn’t also impacted by discrimination. “The fact that women are over-represented in low-wage jobs is itself a phenomenon that exists and is influenced by discrimination,” Martin says.

Women may encounter harassment or hostility when trying to enter or advance in male-dominated fields where pay is greater, and they are disproportionately hampered by family caregiving responsibilities. Research also shows that when women enter a field in large numbers, wages tend to go down, and that men are paid higher salaries even in fields that women tend to dominate, such as nursing.

In the SurveyMonkey poll, respondents were asked what they saw as major reasons for the pay gap. Women were more likely to cite unconscious bias and sexism, while men were more likely to say it was because women work fewer hours than men and are “generally in careers that don’t pay as much.”

When asked what they thought of the fact that women were paid less than men for similar types of work, 71 percent of women characterized it as “very unfair,” compared to 48 percent of men. While a majority of women (62 percent) said that there are still significant obstacles that make it harder for women to get ahead, a majority of men (58 percent) said that obstacles that may have made it harder for women to get ahead in the past are now “largely gone.”

When asked about their own companies, one-third of women said that men make more money than women, while just 13 percent of men said the same.

### **Fixing the gap**

The poll also asked about several solutions being proposed as ways to close the gap, many of which make an appearance in the Paycheck Fairness Act. That bill, passed by the House of Representatives on March 27, would prohibit employers from asking job candidates about their salary history (to help keep suppressed wages from following

workers as they move from job to job). It would mandate that employers share salary data with the government, a measure proposed under Obama that has also been winding its way through the court system and would prohibit employers from retaliating against employees who discuss wages with their colleagues.

Research suggests that transparency can be a powerful tool. If employees of a company know what other workers in the same position are getting paid, that not only lays bare any discrepancies but also can give underpaid employees bargaining power.

Just over half of respondents said they thought it would be helpful for companies to report pay statistics to the government (55 percent) or the public (52 percent). A similar proportion said it would be helpful to prohibit employers from asking about previous pay. In each case, women were more likely than men to see potential in these measures.

When asked if they had ever shared information about their salaries with their colleagues, 29 percent of respondents said they had, and another 24 percent said they would be willing to. Among those who said they would not be willing to, the most popular reason explaining why is that they felt it was “unprofessional” to discuss such information.

“It’s clear that there isn’t yet a solution that Americans are willing to rally behind,” says Jillesa Gebhardt, a SurveyMonkey research scientist who led work on the poll. “And it may be very challenging to develop one that the majority will support.”

### **‘Blissfully unaware’**

Another culprit that researchers have pointed to is the “expectation gap.” Nina Roussille, a graduate student working in the University of California–Berkeley Opportunity Lab, partnered with job platform Hired to analyze pay disparities in the tech industry. What she found is that women tended to ask for less money than similarly qualified male peers. “Women expect less and therefore get less,” she says. Transparency efforts, advocates note, can also help individuals have a better sense of their true market value.

Hired has been releasing reports on salaries that candidates ask for and are offered through their platform for several years. As the issue of equal pay has become more prominent, the gap between what men and women are offered for jobs in tech has been decreasing, according to their data. And the frequency at which women ask for lower salaries has been on the downswing, as well.

Hired CEO Mehul Patel emphasizes that while their data shows things in the tech industry are getting better, certain groups — such as Hispanic women and black women

— remain particularly underpaid when compared to white male peers. When asked about the sizable chunk of the population who thinks that equal pay is a non-issue, Patel suggests that it may come from a lack of first-hand experience.

“If you’re not living it,” he says, “maybe you’re blissfully unaware.”

Sourced From: [\(TIME\)](#)

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