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House of Representatives

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Opening Statement

Rep. Elijah E. Cummings, Ranking Member

Hearing on "Open to Visitors? Assessing the Federal Effort to Minimize the Sequester's Impact on Access to Our Nation's Capital and National Treasures"

April 16, 2013

Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Before I address the topic of today's hearing, I want to take a moment to express our deepest sympathies to the victims of yesterday's bombings at the Boston Marathon. Yesterday was a holiday in Boston—Patriot's Day—and what was supposed to be a celebration turned into a horrible tragedy for these victims and their families. Our thoughts and prayers are with them.

I also want to commend our first responders, emergency medical teams, healthcare providers, and especially the law enforcement officials at the local, state, and federal levels who no doubt will be working on this case in the days and weeks to come. We thank them for their service and we wish them well.

* * *

Today the Committee is holding its second hearing on how federal agencies are implementing massive across-the-board cuts imposed by sequestration. I fully support this hearing because Congress needs to understand how these indiscriminate cuts are negatively affecting our citizens.

The Committee has called three agencies to testify: the National Park Service, the Smithsonian Institution, and the National Archives and Records Administration. All three agencies have a significant presence here in Washington, and all three are suffering from the negative effects of sequestration.

As I understand it, the National Park Service plans to furlough all 767 Park Police employees. It may continue its hiring freeze, which has left about 900 positions vacant, and it expects about three-fourths of its cuts to be taken from facility maintenance, visitor services, park protection, and resource stewardship. It may delay road openings, deploy fewer park patrols, and close entire facilities, such as campgrounds and visitor centers.

The Smithsonian may have to take similar measures, including reducing guard forces at its facilities. It may reduce or close certain exhibits, galleries, or museums, and it may postpone maintenance and defer capital projects. It also may delay the opening of the new National Museum of African American History and Culture by cutting funds to hire critical staff.

The National Archives also may have to eliminate exhibits and public programs, reduce hours for researchers, and cut contracts to preserve paper and electronic records. It also may be forced to reduce public access to records, including records sought by veterans and their families to verify eligibility for federal benefits to which they are entitled.

At our last hearing, we discussed how Speaker Boehner and House Republicans insisted on these massive cuts in exchange for averting default on the national debt. They considered this a political victory. Today, although Republican leaders take credit for these cuts, they do not take responsibility for their negative effects.

Some critics argue that federal agencies could avoid these negative consequences simply by transferring funds from different accounts or by selectively cutting only certain programs. They even suggest that agencies might be making cuts unnecessarily to inflate their negative impact for political reasons.

As we learned at our previous hearing, however, Congress did not give agencies wide discretion to implement sequestration. Congress imposed these across-the-board cuts at every programmatic level, and Congress has passed multiple restrictions to prevent agencies from transferring or reprogramming funds.

Critics seem unable or unwilling to acknowledge this one simple fact: these massive cuts have consequences. Serious, negative, and harmful consequences for the American people. Anyone who blames the President for closures and cut-backs in Washington D.C.—whether at the White House or at the three agencies here today—is either being unfair or is misinformed.

I would like to put up some photos, if I may. These are pictures of office buildings right here in the Capitol. Republican leaders drastically cut funds for the Capitol Police this year. So office buildings throughout Congress have been forced to shut their doors. Lines for the general public now spiral into the street, and I am sure almost every congressional staffer in this room has been affected by this as well.

Is this somehow the President's fault? Of course not. Cuts have consequences. The sooner we recognize that, the sooner we can begin working with federal agencies to protect them and the American public from these mindless, across-the-board cuts.

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