

The Galveston County Daily News - NASA employees head back to work

By ALEX MACON | Posted: Friday, October 18, 2013 12:30 am

JOHNSON SPACE CENTER — Thousands of NASA employees and contractors returned to work Thursday at Johnson Space Center.

The 16-day government shutdown that furloughed the vast majority of the center's more than 3,000 employees ended, but the effects of the political impasse in Washington, D.C., will continue to be felt as the space center gets back to business.

Johnson Space Center spokesman Kelly Humphries said employees were settling back in to work this week. The shutdown essentially closed the space center and halted work on several projects, so it will take some time to get things up and running, Humphries said.

"We're just taking the time to get our wheels back under us," he said.

NASA's dormant website and social media accounts were back online Thursday.

In a statement, NASA Administrator Charles Bolden called the shutdown "a challenging time of sacrifice for the entire NASA family." He said the space agency would work to get employees up to speed and safely restart various projects and initiatives.

"We've been away for some time now; so, please don't expect that we can return to normalcy in a day or two or even a week," Bolden said.

Many of the more-than 10,000 contractors with Johnson Space Center also will get back to work this week.

Federal employees will receive back pay for furloughed days and are expected to be paid Oct. 25.

Contractors with the space center will not have that luxury, however, said Bob Mitchell, president of the Bay Area Houston Economic Partnership.

Private businesses and employees who have gone more than two weeks without a paycheck have been badly hurt by the shutdown, Mitchell said.

Mike Glover, a private contractor who works on a maintenance crew at Johnson Space Center, said the shutdown had thrown his family's finances into disarray.

Glover said his wife and several of his friends recently lost their jobs. The shutdown also made it more difficult for Glover to run Dog Dynasty, a nonprofit animal rescue group he helps operate.

He said he was frustrated with the political gridlock in Washington.

“They’re like little sixth-grade kids fighting,” Glover said.

Isaac Mensah, a private contractor who trains astronauts in the use of robotic equipment, said he was able to find work during the shutdown, but he was forced to use some vacation time. He also said he was frustrated with the lack of compromise in the nation’s capital.

As federal budget discussions continue, it’s critical for individuals to encourage elected officials to negotiate, Mitchell said.

“We all need to be concerned that it’s possible it’s going to happen again,” Mitchell said. “We’ve seen what happens.”

Mitchell said the shutdown had a ripple effect that damaged private business in the area, as well as the morale of families and workers connected to Johnson Space Center.

“Everyone in this community was affected one way or the other, whether it was financial, personal or emotional,” he said.