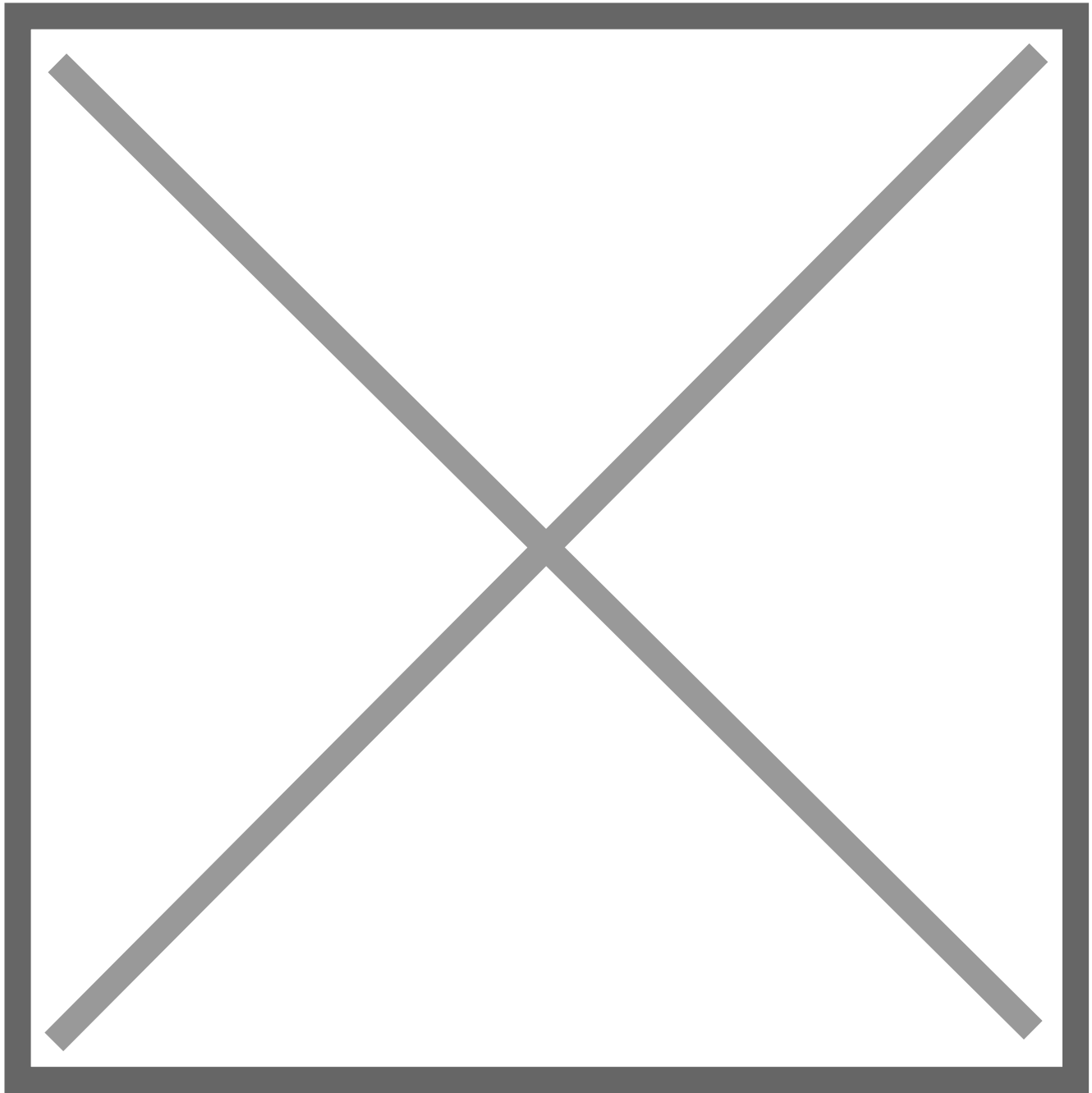


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Volunteers serve meals to guests at Catholic Charities' St. Maria's Meals program
Aug. 20, 2025. (OSV News/Courtesy of Catholic Charities)

Kate Scanlon

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Federal food assistance programs used by millions could be at risk as the federal government shutdown continues, proponents of those programs said.

The federal government went into a shutdown Oct. 1 after Congress failed to pass a budget signed into law by the president by that date.

During a government shutdown, some types of essential government services are exempt, including Social Security payments to older adults, but many other functions of government are suspended. Hundreds of thousands of federal workers are subject to furloughs, meaning they must stop working and will not be paid until the federal government reopens.

The Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children, or WIC, is an \$8 billion program that operates on a smaller \$150 million contingency fund, and could potentially run out in the event of a long shutdown. WIC provides vouchers for low-income households — affecting 6 million women and children — to buy infant formula and healthy foods like fresh fruits and vegetables that are often otherwise out of financial reach.

John Berry, president of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul's National Council of the United States, told OSV News in regard to WIC, states would struggle to fund the program on their own if they were unsure they would receive the funds back from the federal government.

"They just don't have the money there," he said.

Food insecurity, Berry said, is the "casualty of the failure of a lot of other things."

"It's a failure of adequate wage levels, a failure of adequate job opportunities, a failure of the prices of housing, healthcare, food," he said.

A substantial number of Catholic households in the U.S. are vulnerable to shutdowns that affect government assistance to families with low incomes. Updated Pew Research data released in 2025 found 36% of Catholic households make under \$50,000, including 18% making under \$30,000.

The federal poverty line for a family of four in the U.S. is \$32,150 in 2025.

As of Oct. 8, Republicans and Democrats remained at a stalemate over enhanced subsidies under the Affordable Care Act, former President Barack Obama's health care law also known as "Obamacare." The subsidies, or tax credits, are used by lower-to-middle-income households to reduce their out-of-pocket costs for enrolling in the program. It is set to expire soon, and Democrats are seeking an extension as the ACA marketplace premiums of 24 million Americans are expected to more than double otherwise.

Dueling narratives surrounding the shutdown had many lawmakers blaming the other side of the aisle for the ongoing stalemate.

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White House press secretary Karoline Leavitt blamed WIC running out of funds on Democrats, and said in an Oct. 7 post on the X social media platform that the White House has "identified a creative solution to transfer resources from Section 232 tariff revenue to this critical program."

"The Trump White House will not allow impoverished mothers and their babies to go hungry because of the Democrats' political games," she said.

However, it was unclear how such a proposal would work, as collected tariff funds go into a general fund managed by the Treasury Department. Those funds are in effect frozen until Congress passes a funding bill.

Georgia Machell, president and CEO of the National WIC Association, said in an Oct. 7 statement that any effort to fund the program was welcome, but critical details

remained uncertain.

"We welcome efforts to keep WIC afloat during the shutdown, but families need long-term stability, not short-term uncertainty," Machell said. "We still don't know how much funding this measure provides, how quickly states will receive it, or how long it will sustain operations."

Machell added, "There is no substitute for Congress doing its job. WIC needs full-year funding, not just temporary lifelines."

Berry told OSV News he was also concerned about those who would not be paid during the shutdown and their ability to pay for food and housing.

"New people are not going to be able to enroll (in SNAP and WIC) because there won't be staff at the federal level to process applications," he said. "So if we got into an extended shutdown, there is going to be some amount of people that are stuck waiting for the shutdown to end before they can even get applications in."

The U.S. bishops and Catholic entities that advocate for, or work with, people who are poor and vulnerable in the U.S. have generally cautioned against government shutdowns.

The U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops has also emphasized that the Catholic Church — the largest single non-governmental provider of health care in the world — teaches "the right to health care is a fundamental necessity for the preservation of life and human flourishing," and urged lawmakers on Capitol Hill earlier this year to take steps to strengthen that access.

Chieko Noguchi, a USSCB spokesperson, previously told OSV News in a written statement that a government shutdown "harms families and individuals who rely on federal services." She said the conference hoped lawmakers will work to reach a bipartisan agreement that ends the shutdown "as quickly as possible."