

October 11, 2013

The Honorable John Boehner
Speaker of the House
H-232, United States Capitol
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Mr. Speaker:

I write to express serious concerns about your proposal to allow a temporary increase in the debt ceiling, but not act to immediately end the government shutdown. Raising the debt ceiling to respond to the concerns of Wall Street without opening the government fails to address many critical problems and ignores the American people who need the government reopened now. As Ranking Member of the House Judiciary Committee, I am particularly concerned about the adverse impact the shutdown is having on the provision of justice. These issues were discussed at length during the course of a forum held by the Committee Democrats earlier this week on October 8th.

For example, Diane Moyer, a board member for the National Alliance to End Sexual Violence and the Legal Director for the Pennsylvania Coalition Against Rape, stated that 1,300 rape crisis centers may have to close “in a matter of weeks” as a result of the government shutdown. She said, “If Congress does not end the shutdown very soon, rape crisis centers will not be able to pay advocates or keep their doors open.” Ms. Moyer gave compelling testimony that effects of the shutdown are matters of life and death for victims of rape and sexual abuse – these vital services are necessary to prevent death and suicide from occurring and to protect children.

Another problem presented by the shutdown is its impact on the U.S. Department of Justice. Robert Kengle, co-director of the Voting Rights Project of the Lawyers’ Committee for Civil Rights Under Law, warned of the shutdown’s long-term effects on the Department’s ability to enforce voting rights laws. He said, for example, that because more than 70 percent of the Department’s Civil Rights Division staff has been furloughed, the Division may be unable to monitor elections to the extent it should in the absence of the shutdown. Additionally, Scott Lilly, former staff director of the House Appropriations Committee, described how budgetary constraints are diminishing the FBI’s capacity to deal with terrorist threats.

The government shutdown also affects numerous business owners. In light of the fact that the Department of Labor is unable to accept or process various applications, high-tech companies cannot get engineers through the H-1B program, farmers cannot get needed farmworkers through the H-2A program, and other seasonal employers are blocked from obtaining H-2B workers.

The federal courts are also experiencing tremendous adverse impacts from the government shutdown in conjunction with the impacts of sequestration. For instance, the president of the ABA stated that the federal judiciary is “near collapse.” This is because the current government shutdown, unlike the extended federal government shutdown in 1995-96, is occurring in addition to the funding cutbacks imposed by sequestration. The federal judicial system is being forced to curtail various programs that supervise individuals in the community awaiting trial and that monitor those who have served their time and subsequently are released from prison on parole. As a retired federal judge stated at the forum, “Because of sequestration and the government shutdown, the men and women of the federal judiciary face the unthinkable: they no longer have the resources to meet their constitutional mission. And, if things don’t change very soon, they might not be able to adequately do their job.”

Given these serious concerns, I urge you to include – as part of your proposal dealing with the nation’s debt ceiling – to a cessation of the government shutdown. The federal government must be immediately reopened to ensure the provision of justice for all Americans.

Sincerely,

John Conyers, Jr.
Ranking Member

cc: The Honorable Nancy Pelosi, House Minority Leader
The Honorable Bob Goodlatte, Chairman, House Committee on the Judiciary