

THE FEDERAL WORKER

Casting a wary eye on the 'supercommittee'

When the "supercommittee" meets for the first time Thursday, federal employees will have good reason to wonder, "What's this mean for me?"

The answer, at least in the short term, won't be good.

The 12 members of the bipartisan panel, properly known as the Joint Select Committee on Deficit Reduction, are charged with finding \$1.5 trillion in federal budget cuts over 10 years. If they don't get the job done by Thanksgiving, cuts worth \$1.2 trillion will automatically begin taking effect. That money will be on top of the almost \$1 trillion in cuts over 10 years that Congress has already approved.

Of course, getting Uncle Sam on a stronger financial footing will be good for the country and that's good for everyone, including his staff.

Yet, however you slice the numbers, federal agencies will take a hit. And when agencies take a hit, it's the federal workforce that feels the pain more than anyone. When budgets are cut, measures to cap or cut the workforce, including layoffs, aren't far behind.

"Impulsive and drastic reductions in the federal workforce may help to scratch an ideological itch," reads a letter to the committee from Gregory J. Junemann, president of the International Federation of Professional and Technical Engineers, "but it will surely threaten the government services that taxpayers expect."

Expect the committee also to consider other budget-reduction tools aimed specifically at federal employees: extending the two-year pay freeze, reducing retirement payments and charging employees more for health insurance are among proposals previously suggested.

"It's going to be very important, I think, that as those issues are discussed, that we make sure that federal employees are not scapegoated," said Rep. Chris Van Hollen, a Democrat on the



FEDERAL DIARY

Joe Davidson

supercommittee whose suburban Maryland district is home to thousands of federal workers. He said he will work to make sure the panel does not "balance the budget on the backs of federal employees."

None of the Republicans on the panel agreed to be interviewed.

Federal employee organizations are trying to fight off measures targeting federal workers with letters to committee members that emphasize the sacrifice the workforce is already making through the two-year pay freeze imposed in January.

"As you remember well, the very first budget reduction move was to freeze federal pay for two years," National Treasury Employees Union President Colleen M. Kelley reminded the committee co-chairman, Sen. Patty Murray (D-Wash.), in a letter last week.

That's not small change. The freeze "is a steep price for federal employees to pay, but it will save an estimated \$2 billion by the end of FY 2011 and more than \$60 billion over the next 10 years," wrote Beth Moten, legislative and political director of the American Federation of Government Employees, in a letter to Murray.

Federal employee organizations have been proactive in letting the committee know about the concerns of the workforce. But their letters may not carry the same weight as the personal relationships my Washington Post colleague Dan Eggen detailed in his fine piece Wednesday on K Street's close ties to the debt panel. Eggen reported that many former

staffers of the committee members now are lobbyists who will be pressuring their old friends on Capitol Hill on behalf of big businesses.

"When the committee sits down to do its work, it's not like they're in an idealized, platonic debating committee," Bill Allison, editorial director of the Sunlight Foundation, told Eggen. "They're going to have in mind the interests of those they are most familiar with, including their big donors and former advisers."

Committee members probably are already familiar with a litany of proposals that would use the federal workforce to save money. While many of the plans have been introduced by conservative Republicans, others carry the imprimatur of President Obama's bipartisan National Commission on Fiscal Responsibility and Reform.

One of the best known of the commission's recommendations could lead to a change in the way federal employee retirement benefits are calculated.

Currently, retirement payments are based on the top three years of income. The commission said that using the top five instead could save \$5 billion by 2020. It also could send workers near retirement rushing to the door.

The commission also recommended adding another year to the two-year pay freeze and making employees pay more for their health insurance.

"Putting an unfair financial burden on the backs of federal employees simply because they perform the work of our government is misguided," Patricia Niehaus, president of the Federal Managers Association, said in her letter to Murray.

Unfair and misguided perhaps, but federal workers should not be surprised to find their backs further bent by additional budget-balancing items when this process is done.

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MATT LESTER

A 50-year tradition of caring

Linda J. Washington, head of the Local Federal Coordinating Committee, speaks to federal workers Wednesday at the Grand Hyatt Washington as she kicks off the Combined Federal Campaign of the National Capital Area. The CFC is the federal government's annual charitable-giving drive, which has set a goal of \$67.2 million for this year, its 50th anniversary.

Battle against smoking is part of commitment to public health

DEYTON FROM BI

than nonsmokers.

"I have huge respect for smokers who are addicted, especially those trying to quit," said Deyton, who has been at his current job for two years. "I don't damn them. I don't put them down. Nicotine is truly one of the most addictive products on the planet ... as addictive as heroin and cocaine. So make no mistake: [Quitting] is not just a matter of will."

Armed with a new law that gives the FDA the power to regulate the way tobacco is marketed, distributed and sold, the agency also requires that tobacco companies identify each of the 4,000-plus ingredients in cigarettes.

"I have said cigarettes, until now, are the only mass-consumed product in America that the consumer didn't know what's in it," Deyton said. "We have a responsibility to understand what those products are and what it means to human health, and we are working on that now."

He continued: "We've known for a long time how dangerous tobacco use is. How do we move to the next step and give the public the tools for behavior change, to make the right decision for themselves? We don't want to say to an adult, 'You can't do certain things.' We want to give the right information to make decisions for themselves. Kids are different. ..."

[They] don't realize that they're picking up something that could start them on a lifetime habit that kills 50 percent of its users."

Deyton, known all his life by his childhood nickname "Bopper" (for the first word he uttered), tried cigarettes as a teenager.

"I hated it. It didn't do anything for me," he said, recalling the harsh taste of Pall Malls and the harsh realization of how smoking really looked.

"I was probably 16 or 17. I had just started driving, and Mom asked me to go pick up the dry cleaning."

In the car, he discovered his mother's pack, with a few smokes inside.

"I'm driving, and I feel like I'm on top of the world," he said. "I've got the car. The windows are down. I got my cigarette. ... I look over and see these cars [in a reflection] and this stupid ... teenager is in a car smoking. I turned to look at this jerk, and there was nobody there but me. It was me."

Deyton is the son of a doctor and bio-statistician who met while setting up polio rehabilitation clinics. He was born in Okmulgee, Okla., on the Muscogee reservation. He grew up in suburban St. Louis, the youngest of five siblings, all of whom have gone into health care.

He graduated from the University of Kansas and received a

master's degree in public health from the Harvard School of Public Health. He worked on Capitol Hill as a legislative aide and became a staff member at the old Department of Health, Education and Welfare.

At the same time, he helped found the Whitman-Walker Clinic as a health clinic for gay men and lesbians before AIDS redefined everything and the clinic became the hub for HIV treatment. Deyton left the government job and the clinic to go to medical school at George Washington University and to do postdoctorate training at the University of Southern California.

Looking forward, Deyton thinks health literacy is the most important and under-recognized problem in health care.

"If we could correct health literacy in this nation, a lot of those chronic, preventable diseases that are taking up a huge amount not just of the nation's economics but individuals' lives would change dramatically," he said.

He still practices medicine on Fridays, seeing veterans at a clinic. There is little danger that he will turn entirely to private practice or lab work, however.

"It's why I think government service is so great," he said. "I like the pure joy of exploration of applying scientific principles to the good of the population."

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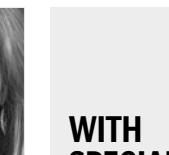
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The Fed Page

Debt-cutters' donations

Watchdogs urge supercommittee members to put off raising money while the panel does its work. **A17**

Stimulus spending lags

Energy Department grants haven't been put to use as quickly as the Obama administration hoped. **A17**



MARVIN JOSEPH/THE WASHINGTON POST

"We've known for a long time how dangerous tobacco use is," Lawrence Deyton said. "How do we move to the next step and give the public the tools for behavior change, to make the right decision for themselves?"

ROBERT McCARTNEY

Self-interest pushes political debate off the table

MCCARTNEY FROM BI

these tricks by gerrymandering, or drawing bizarrely shaped districts designed to protect incumbents or unseat rivals. They do so regardless of whether the lines reflect county or municipal boundaries or whether they break up such groups as minority populations or rural voters.

"It's very difficult to completely extract politics from anything. But I think we could do a far better job of preserving geographical communities of interest and make the lines more understandable to voters," said Bob Holsworth, who chaired Virginia's bipartisan redistricting commission.

The General Assembly set aside the group's recommendations in the spring, choosing instead to put forth competing partisan proposals.

The practice tends to drive politicians to ideological extremes. The parties safeguard incumbents by creating districts that are so lopsided that politicians needn't worry about the other side in a general election. Instead, they end up focusing on the party primary and cater to the base.

"It often becomes true that the real risk that an incumbent faces is not being beaten by the other party, but being challenged from within the party, in all likelihood by someone who's more extreme," said lawyer Paul Smith, a partner at Jenner & Block and co-author of a redistricting manual published by the American Bar Association.

An important byproduct is a chronic lack of ideological give-and-take in campaigns. One party barely bothers to make an effort in many races, because the result is preordained.

Stephen Shapiro, a local Democratic Party official in Bethesda, testified to that at a redistricting hearing in Rockville last month.

"In some respects, the current congressional districts have made my job as a Democratic precinct chair too easy. My candidates always win — at least in the general election," Shapiro said. "I am concerned that it is decreasing debate and turnout. Most of the competition is in our primary elections, where there is relative agreement among most candidates."

Quentin Kidd, a political science professor at Christopher Newport University in Newport News, estimated that three-quarters of seats in the Virginia House of Delegates are noncompetitive. "That can't be good for the democratic process. There's really no debate over policy, no clash of ideas going

on," he said. None of this will change until the public insists on it. In U.S. House redistricting, both national parties are so keen on trying to secure an advantage ahead of 2012 that other concerns are ignored.

"At the moment, the pressure from on top is so great on Republican- and Democratic-controlled states to bolster the party numbers that all other state-based or population-based interests are being pushed to the back burner," said Todd Eberly, a political science professor at St. Mary's College.

It's almost certainly too late to fix this for the current decade. The public should start now to demand a fairer, more neutral method after the 2020 Census.

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I discuss local issues at 8:51 a.m. Friday on WAMU (88.5 FM).