

WASHINGTON NEWS

FEC head laments shutdown and inability to enforce laws

BY DAVE LEVINTHAL

CENTER FOR PUBLIC INTEGRITY

The 2020 presidential race has begun. Super PACs and party committees are raising and spending gobs of cash. The threat of foreigners infiltrating U.S. political campaigns looms.

And the agency charged with enforcing and regulating the nation's campaign finance laws isn't functioning – a casualty of the federal government's partial shutdown over funding for a wall on the U.S.-Mexico border.

The government shutdown is now 14 days old with no end in sight.

"This is not the time for the FEC to be sidelined," said Ellen Weintraub, a Democratic commissioner since 2002 who this year is serving a one-year term as chairwoman.

"We're just stuck, and there's nothing in our building that has anything to do with walls."

Weintraub declined to blame either President Trump or her fellow Democrats in Congress for the stalemate.

"But the result is just not good. It's incredibly wasteful and unproductive. It's the taxpayers probably paying a lot of people not to work," she said.

The FEC's shutdown plan indicates that the agency has furloughed about 90 percent of its roughly 300-member workforce.

So long as the FEC is inoperative, the agency cannot investigate complaints or probe political committees suspected of wrongdoing.

It cannot penalize political scofflaws. The commission will likely cancel two meetings scheduled for next week.

And it isn't attending to more routine functions, either, such as answering questions from officials at any of



Getty Images

The FEC is a casualty of the government shutdown.

the thousands of federally registered political committees required to file regular financial disclosures with the FEC.

"There's no support for people who are just trying to comply with the law," Weintraub noted.

Electronic campaign finance filings should continue to automatically appear on the FEC's website for public consumption, but documents submitted to the FEC on paper, or any public documents the agency would create itself, will not.

FEC Vice Chairman Matthew Petersen, R, did not respond to inquiries.

The current government shutdown hasn't yet resulted in a repeat of a 2013 closure, when the entire FEC staff was furloughed save for the commissioners themselves. Chinese hackers immediately broke into the FEC's computer systems, as not a single commission employee had been deemed "necessary to the prevention of imminent threats" to federal property.

This time around, a skeleton staff of employees is in

place to defend against such activity, "and we're in a better situation than we were last time," Weintraub said.

The federal government's current budgetary histrionics are just the latest in a series of challenges for the FEC.

Commissioners are often ideologically divided to the point of legal stalemates, particularly on high-profile matters, and the agency has been operating on the edge of another kind of precipice since February.

That's when Republican Commissioner Lee Goodman resigned, leaving the six-member commission with just four members – the minimum number required for a "quorum."

The FEC must have a quorum to attend to its most significant responsibilities, including conducting official public meetings and official legal guidance to political actors.

Of the four remaining commissioners, all have long overstayed their six-year terms, serving in "holdover status" because Trump, as well as President Barack Obama before him, did not replace them.

Collectively, the FEC's commissioners – Weintraub, Petersen, Republican Caroline Hunter and independent Steven Walther – have now served 35 years past their terms' expirations.

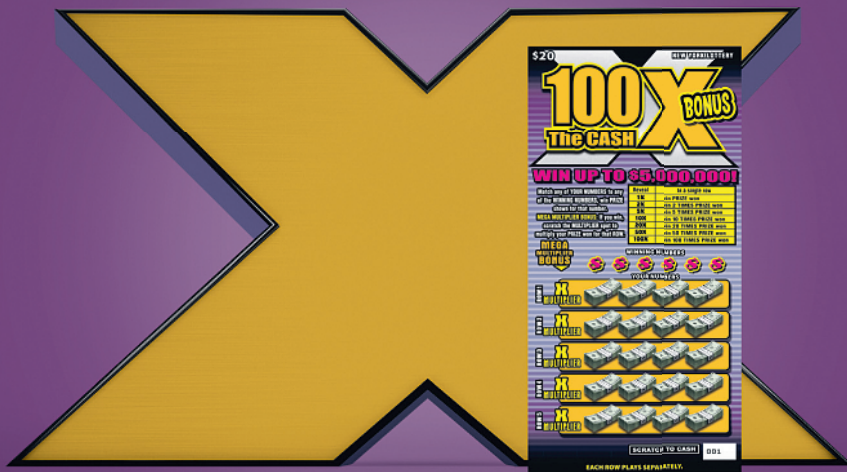
Trump has offered no nominee to replace Goodman or Ann Ravel, a Democrat who resigned in March 2017.

The president's lone FEC nominee – Texas attorney Trey Trainor, who aided Trump's presidential campaign – has gone more than 15 months without even receiving a confirmation hearing from the U.S. Senate Rules Committee, say nothing of a full Senate confirmation vote.

© 2019 New York Lottery



WIN UP TO \$5,000,000



EXCEPTIONAL. EXHILARATING. EXCELLENT.

LOOK FOR THE X AND YOU COULD MULTIPLY YOUR WINNINGS UP TO 100 TIMES.

PLEASE PLAY RESPONSIBLY. Struggling with a gambling addiction? Call the HOPEline 1-877-846-7369 or text HOPENY (467369). You must be 18 years or older to purchase a lottery ticket. NYLResponsiblePlay.com

NEW YORK LOTTERY BUL1468277

© 2019 New York Lottery



WIN UP TO \$1,000,000



EXEMPLARY EXPONENTIAL EXPLOITS.

LOOK FOR THE X AND YOU COULD MULTIPLY YOUR WINNINGS UP TO 20 TIMES.

PLEASE PLAY RESPONSIBLY. Struggling with a gambling addiction? Call the HOPEline 1-877-846-7369 or text HOPENY (467369). You must be 18 years or older to purchase a lottery ticket. NYLResponsiblePlay.com

NEW YORK LOTTERY BUL1468277

Migrants know Trump rejects them, but they aren't giving up

BY PAULINA VILLEGAS
NEW YORK TIMES

TIJUANA, Mexico – Life in Tijuana's largest migrant shelter has begun to take on the familiar rhythms and sounds of a Central American neighborhood: Early in the morning, adults rise and get ready to go to work. Children dress for school. Mothers gather huge bundles of dirty clothes for the day's wash. Vendors hawk coffee.

"We are getting used to this life," said Norma Perez, 40, who left Honduras in a migrant caravan bound for the United States about two months ago with her 5-year-old son.

For weeks, they walked from Central America up to the Mexican border with the United States, fleeing poverty and violence. All along the way, President Trump described the migrants as a danger, as invaders trying to crash their way into the United States. But they didn't stop their trek north.

When they arrived at the border, Tijuana was not ready for them. The conditions were deplorable, and the migrants were surprised they would not be able to apply for asylum right away. Twice, groups of migrants approached the border fence and were repelled by border patrol agents using tear gas and pepper spray.

But now, life for many of the new arrivals has settled down. Mexico's new president, Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador, has begun to make good on promises to create alternatives to immigration, and he has rolled out a plan to increase wages along the U.S.-Mexico border. And the migrants themselves have begun to create a sense of community in the shelters here, like the city's largest, known as El Barretal. They said they have no intention of turning back.

Trump "should personally go to Honduras so he can

see with his own eyes that we simply can't go back, that there are no jobs, no companies, nothing," Perez said.

So she is settling in at El Barretal, a concert venue turned into a shelter where tents are lined up in orderly rows on the clean concrete floor. For the thousands of migrants like her in El Barretal and 18 other Tijuana shelters, this is home – for now.

As she waits for her chance to apply for asylum in the United States, Perez has decided to apply for a temporary humanitarian visa in Mexico. That will let her find a job in Tijuana and support herself and her child for as long as necessary, she said. Rodolfo Figueroa, an official with the National Immigration Institute, a government agency, said most of the migrants who arrived in Tijuana with the caravan and who applied for humanitarian visas have been approved. In total, 2,200 visas have been awarded in little over a month, he said. About 1,300 migrants have either been deported or voluntarily returned to their home countries, he added.

Early on a typical morning in the El Barretal shelter, migrants who hold a temporary Mexican visa head to work at a nearby market as meat and poultry vendors. Others make their way to jobs as truck drivers, construction workers or laborers in the city's electronics manufacturing plants.

The shelter's manager, Leonardo Nery, said the number of people living there had dropped from 3,000 a month ago to around 1,000 as some migrants found their own living arrangements in town. Others have crossed over to the United States or returned home, he said.

Around noon on most days, English classes start inside a small white tent with bright blue carpets covering the concrete floor. Puzzle pieces are spread on tables, along with drawings and crayons. Posters

with names of colors hang on the walls.

Darwin Bardales, an 18-year-old Honduran, has been working as a volunteer in the shelter's English school.

"It feels good to do something for the others, especially the kids," he said. "After all, we are all in the same vulnerable situation."

The children usually take classes in English and Spanish, learning to read, to color and to eat healthy foods. On Friday, the classes got a late start: The arrival of donated teddy bears and pinatas had the children's full attention until a female voice boomed from the loudspeaker.

"Hello everybody, it's your teacher!" the voice said. "It's time for class, kids!" Adult migrants scattered around the camp cheered in response.

Food is cooked and distributed both by private aid groups and by Mexican marines twice a day – rice, soup and sandwiches. It is a barebones existence, but friendships have developed and at least one wedding took place in a downtown shelter.

Their first few days in Tijuana in November were chaotic, and a bitter disappointment, migrants said. The Trump administration had limited the number of asylum applicants that could be seen in a day, separated parents from their children, sent troops to patrol the frontier – and even, starting last month, shut down the federal government in a bid to get funding for a border wall.

Housed initially in an open-air sports complex, the migrants saw a torrential downpour turn the ground to mud around their makeshift tents. Children started to get sick and adults grew dispirited.

But to many, those hardships felt temporary – and less threatening than the conditions they had left at home. And life at El Barretal is a definite step up from those first, soaking days.