

Knights 8086 Rescue Coast Guard

NEW SMYRNA BEACH — Just a fraction of the 42,000 men and women who patrol and defend America’s coastlines and waterways are stationed here, where the Indian River meets Ponce de Leon Inlet at the Atlantic Ocean.

But the community hasn’t forgotten about the 43 U.S. Coast Guard members who — through no fault of their own — are working without pay as a result of the government shutdown. Local efforts are also ongoing to help more than 100 Daytona Beach International Airport workers as the lapse in funding stretched into its 33rd day and hope for a deal between Congress and President Trump continued.

One partial solution is the Pay Our Coast Guard Act, which appears to be gaining bipartisan steam, particularly from Florida congressional members.

Admiral Karl Schultz of the U.S. Coast Guard recorded a message this week saying he’s been “heartened” by support from communities across the nation.

“But ultimately, I find it unacceptable that Coast Guard men and women have to rely on food pantries and donations to get through day-to-day life as service members,” Schultz said.

Coast Guard support

Locally, Abby Albertson of New Smyrna Beach started a support campaign on Facebook that’s led to the involvement of Cross Creek Community Church, the Venetian Bay Homeowners Association and the Spruce Creek Country Club.

“I’ve seen incredible kindness from people,” Albertson said. “This isn’t a political situation in any way, shape or form. It’s frustrating that people have to serve and work without pay.”

Through Monday, her effort has led to more than \$3,500 in gift cards, plus regular deliveries of food and household goods that have been set up on two tables in the Coast Guard station’s mess hall.

Albertson’s husband, Jeffrey, is a big part of her connection to the Ponce de Leon Inlet station.

He’s familiar with many of the Ponce station personnel as a member of the Coast Guard Auxiliary, but the family is careful to separate his Auxiliary work from his volunteerism.

“He’s normally on base once a week and has gotten to know the guys,” Abby Albertson said. “They’re teenagers, a lot of them, and some have young families.”

‘Here to help’

Jim Waggoner arrived with a group of fellow Knights of Columbus from Our Lady of Hope Catholic Church in Port Orange on Tuesday, delivering about \$1,500 in gift cards to Jeff Graham, representing the U.S. Coast Guard Chief Petty Officer Association.

“We feel we have a duty and an obligation to step up to the plate and do what we can,” said Waggoner, the club’s grand knight.

“Prayerfully,” he said, “we hope that this shutdown is over with soon and these folks are able to get back to a normal life, because this isn’t a normal life for them right now. There isn’t anything normal about it.”

Tim Mell, another of the knights, chimed in: “Diapers don’t wait for back pay.”

Another of the knights, Ernie Jackson, served in the Army in Germany in the 1980s when a furlough left him without enough money for the rent. His bosses gave him a letter to explain the shortfall to creditors such as his landlord.

“He didn’t believe it at first. He thought it was a joke,” Jackson said. “He called the base and found out it was real.”

Graham, who’s also the station’s officer in charge, called the community support “outstanding,” with plenty of food, diapers, household goods — and a lot of cookies.

“Morale is still continuing to be very high,” Graham said. “Everybody has a very positive attitude, and a lot of it is because we’re so humbled by the community support we’ve received. It’s been amazing.”

Airport aid arrivals

Community groups and businesses are also stepping up to help about 50 Transportation Security Administration agents and another 60 Federal Aviation Administration air traffic controllers, said Jay Cassens, director of business development at the Daytona Beach airport.

The airport has provided federal workers two \$10 food vouchers, totaling \$20, which is the most they are allowed to receive. Also, food vendors who normally offer the airport workers 10 percent discounts have now made that 25 percent.

The airport is making a room on the first floor available for food and household items to be dropped off between 8 a.m. and 5 p.m. Monday through Friday, Cassens said.

He has been “surprised how dedicated” the workers are, continuing to complete their shifts despite the missing paychecks. “The attitude is very positive and grateful for the community trying to give back,” Cassens said. “I am a little concerned after they missed their second paycheck. They are starting to feel pressure as bills start to become overdue by a month.”

Waste Not Want Not, a group of Indian Trails Middle School students from Palm Coast, are among those who have gathered donations and are planning to deliver them Wednesday afternoon, said Melissa Castañeda, a parent.

Coast Guard Act

While neither President Trump nor House Speaker Nancy Pelosi appear to be moving toward a solution to the funding lapse that has impacted some 800,000 federal workers, the Pay Our Coast Guard Act has steadily gained supporters.

First introduced by U.S. Sen. John Thune, a South Dakota Republican, the proposal would simply make appropriations available for Coast Guard pay while other funding may be withheld from other agencies. It has also been cosponsored by Republican Sens. Marco Rubio and Rick Scott of Florida and 24 other senators from both parties.

On Wednesday, U.S. Rep. Michael Waltz, a Republican who represents Volusia and Flagler counties, announced he was signing on to the bill that appears to be gaining bipartisan steam. At least 12 members of the Florida delegation have also co-signed, an unlikely alliance including Democrats Charlie Crist, Debbie Wasserman Schultz and Alcee Hastings, as well as Republicans Matt Gaetz, Brian Mast and Ted Yoho.

But there’s no indication either the Senate or House leadership will bring the bills for votes, leaving local Coast Guard members uncertain and partially dependent upon help from their neighbors.

“Our Coasties deserve better,” Waltz tweeted. “It’s unacceptable to have military families living this way.”



Knights of Columbus members, including Tim Mell, right, hand Jeff Graham about \$1,500 worth of \$25 gift cards to help Coast Guard sailors through the federal government shutdown, which has left them unpaid for more than four weeks. Graham accepted the cards on behalf of the U.S. Coast Guard Chief Petty Officers Association. Also pictured, from left, are Knights David Dollieslager, Ted Morrell, Terry Cassidy, Jim Waggoner and Ernie Jackson. [News-Journal/Mark Harper]